Organizers promote economic nationalism at Berlin demonstration against transatlantic trade agreement

Our reporters
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On Saturday, about 250,000 people marched through Berlin to demonstrate against the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) trade agreement. While many of the 250,000 demonstrators wanted to express their dissatisfaction with deteriorating social conditions and the threat of war, the organizers advanced a right-wing agenda of economic nationalism, reformism, and anti-Americanism.

The trade agreement, under the pretext of dismantling "trade barriers," attacks social and democratic rights, environmental standards, and social services, while strengthening the power of corporations and financial institutions. (See: The struggle against the TTIP is a class question.) The trade agreement has met with widespread opposition in the population.

A coalition of over 30 environmental and consumer organizations, trade unions and church organizations had called for the Berlin demonstration. The demonstrations were also supported by the Greens and the Left Party.

Most of the organizers are themselves directly implicated in social cuts and in the promotion of war. They are not demonstrating against TTIP in order to combat the associated attacks on workers' rights and the worsening international conflicts. Rather, they want to direct opposition into harmless channels, promote German nationalism, and safeguard their own sinecures.

German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) chairman Reiner Hoffmann, one of the keynote speakers at the final rally, reaffirmed his willingness to support TTIP. Alongside cosmetic changes, he called for compliance with standards set by the International Labor Organization, which prohibit forced and child labor. He also wanted to ensure that the unions continued to play a role in controlling and suppressing workers struggles.

At the final rally, the Social Democratic politician and political scientist Gesine Schwan said despite the criticism, she was not in favor of breaking off the TTIP negotiations. Many protesters responded with boos and catcalls.

As well as the numerous flags of the organizers, there were also some anti-American slogans, advocating greater German independence from the US. However, the majority of self-painted banners addressed social or environmental issues, as well as the restriction of democratic rights represented by TTIP. "Democracy instead of corporate power," or "fair trade instead of free trade," could be read on some of the posters.

The organizers used 600 buses and five special trains to bring people from all over Germany to the protest in the capital. Among them were many trade union officials, members of the Green Party and the Left Party, as well as representatives of other organizations, like Attac (an anti-globalization group that calls for increased taxes on currency conversions) and Friends of the Earth (an anti-nuclear and environmental organization).

However, many more people came than the 50,000 the organizers had anticipated, and for which they had organized. Many young people took advantage of the demonstration to express their dissatisfaction with social conditions and escalating international tensions. Many participants expressed their opposition to the return of German imperialism and to austerity measures being implemented throughout Europe.

Thirty-four-year-old Andres came to protest against

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pollution and social conditions: “With TTIP and CETA, environmental destruction and the working conditions of millions of people are deteriorating. That so many people are here today shows that the majority do not want such conditions.” The trade unions often do not have a clear stance on these issues, he added.

Michael from Munich demanded a European popular referendum on TTIP. “The TTIP agreement is basically the product of big business lobbyists working with the politicians in Brussels. It is a major attack on democracy. There has to be a European-wide response. That is why I support a European solution.”

Michael expressed his opposition to the erection of new borders and barriers in Europe to prevent refugees entering Europe. “Fears and xenophobia are being deliberately encouraged. What is taking place is a mass movement of people. Millions are fleeing from wars in the Middle East which have their origins in the Iraq war commenced by the US government. That war was fought for oil and power and now we face the consequences.”

Milena and her two friends attended that rally to protest against the lack of democracy involved in the TTIP agreement.

Milena and her friends were not opposed to free trade in principle but advocated for consumer rights, such as the right to quality food. When asked about the role of the Greens in the protest action, the trio noted that the Greens had taken up negative positions on social questions and had helped introduce the Hartz IV legislation. However, they argued that the party could play a positive role with regard to issues such as the environment, data protection and consumer rights.

Philipp and his friends had traveled from the city of Darmstadt to attend the demonstration.

They expressed their opposition to the attack on democracy and basic rights involved in the TTIP agreement. “The legislation represents a major attack on small and middle sized companies (Mittelstand) and will accelerate privatization. It also represents a danger for local authorities which will be stripped of their ability to control their own finances.” The group agreed that there had to be a pan-European solution to the problem which involved more democratic control over the economy. They also expressed criticisms of the Greens regarding the party’s social policies and role in introducing a huge cheap wage sector in Germany.

The apprentice Steffi came to the demonstration with two of her friends. They wanted to protest against “unfair” trade, which they believe is being enforced in favor of the US and with which the “the United States finance their wars.” The current threat of war in the Middle East and other parts of the world is linked to unjust economic policies, “particularly those of the US, but also Germany.” In their opinion, more people must unite against this policy.

Frank, who travelled from Jena to the demonstration, regards trade agreements like TTIP as a great danger. “Such things increase the risk of trade wars and real wars.” In this context, Frank regarded the current buildup of tensions with Russia as very dangerous.

The machinist René especially criticized the fact that corporations would gain even more power from the deal. “TTIP is not transparent. One does not know what is being decided there,” he said. His companion Julia, who works as a speech therapist, drew parallels between the provisions of TIPP and authoritarian regimes. For this reason, “TTIP must be rejected as a whole.”

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