Germany: IG Metall congress backs government in refugee crisis

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The 23rd annual trade union congress of the IG Metall (IGM) engineering union ended on Saturday. For a whole week, almost 500 delegates debated five principal motions tabled by the union executive, 455 political submissions and 39 constitutional amendments at the Frankfurt Congress Centre. All the decisions reached essentially amounted to an agreement to intensify the union's cooperation with the federal government and the employers' associations.

The trade union congress of the "largest single union in the world", as IG Metall likes to call itself, took place under conditions of an increasingly fierce international crisis enveloping the entire capitalist system and the European Union. At the heart of this crisis is the growing drumbeat for war. Since the federal coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) announced the end of Germany's post-World War II military restraint, not a week has passed without further governmental initiatives to purchase new weapons, modernise the army and participate in major military manoeuvres and operations.

At the beginning of IG Metall's conference week on October 19, the NATO "Trident Juncture 2015" manoeuvres reached their climax. Approximately 36,000 soldiers, 140 combat aircraft and 60 warships have been participating in this large-scale military exercise, the largest since the demise of the Soviet Union. The march towards war is increasingly assuming the character of a provocation of Russia and includes the risk of a nuclear confrontation between the great powers.

A few days prior to the conference, the defence department announced it was preparing to launch a major combat mission involving the Bundeswehr's (German military forces) presence in the civil war in Mali. This will constitute the most dangerous deployment of German troops since their disastrous participation in Afghanistan, where 56 soldiers have so far been killed.

The ongoing wars waged by NATO and its allies in the Middle East, North Africa and other countries are forcing increasing numbers of people to flee their homelands, and the swelling tide of refugees has now awakened central Europe to the reality of the devastation spawned by its political elites. European Union (EU) institutions and the German federal government respond to this development by partitioning borders, erecting barbed-wire fences, and empowering abusive security forces and despotic public officials.

At the same time, European politicians, academics and right-wing demagogues exploit the refugee crisis to drum up an extreme right-wing movement that is intent on targeting not only refugees, but any political or social opposition standing in its way.

The fate of the refugees today presages what the capitalist system has in store for the entire working population and youth in the future: oppression, poverty and war. This has already been demonstrated by the brutal austerity programme inflicted on Greece. But great class struggles also inevitably lie ahead.

IG Metall is responding to this prospect with a sharp turn to the right. Adopting something of a siege mentality, it draws politically closer to the federal government and strives to consolidate its so-called "social partnership" with the corporations.

At the beginning of the debate on Monday, delegates passed a perfunctory resolution on the refugee issue: "For solidarity in refugee policy". It is based on an almost identical statement from the IGM advisory council in early September, and begins with a quotation from Chancellor Angela Merkel, stressing the need for a "national effort" to tackle the problem of the rising numbers of refugees.

The declaration is completely in line with governmental policy in other ways as well. It condemns violence against

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refugees and stresses: “The law must consistently pursue and punish perpetrators of violence.” But it says nothing about the violence suffered by refugees and perpetrated by the German state. Although the opening of the union conference last Sunday coincided with a rally of relief organisations in Berlin, where volunteers protested against the catastrophic conditions in the Berlin reception centre and accused the Senate of sabotage, not a word about the authorities’ cold-blooded treatment of refugees is mentioned in the IGM resolution.

Instead, it merely states: “In recent weeks and months, the (Berlin) population has demonstrated to the world its capacity for solidarity and readiness to help. The voluntary commitment of citizens needs to be better supported and coordinated.”

Otherwise, IGM regards refugees primarily as competition threatening local workers, and warns against “wage dumping” and “interference with existing collective agreements and statutory provisions that could be to the detriment of workers.”

Not a word about the causes of refugee flight. Not a word challenging the belligerent policies of NATO and the German federal government, which are forcing more and more people to leave their own countries and embark on perilous attempts to escape. And of course, no call for a joint struggle of workers and refugees against imperialist war policy and capitalist exploitation.

On Wednesday, newly elected IGM chairman Jörg Hofmann (SPD) began his keynote speech by referring to the refugee issue and shouting: “The refugee disaster has shaken us awake.”

But this was then followed by a welter of humanitarian platitudes and hackneyed phrases. Hofmann said the debates in recent weeks had raised many questions and he meticulously enumerated them: What is immigration and what is an immigration country, what is asylum and what is refugee status, what does poverty-driven migration into Europe mean and what does it imply about the situation in the EU? Hofmann’s answer: “No one should pretend that they have a ready answer.”

The stupidity and arrogance of this out-of-touch bureaucratic caste could hardly be expressed more succinctly. While hundreds of thousands of refugees despairingly press themselves against barbed-wire fences here in Europe, having survived weeks of extreme danger in their desperate flight; while families with small children are crammed at night into unheated tents in below-freezing temperatures and the federal government uses military transport aircraft to accelerate their deportation, all this IG Metall boss can do is deliver a pontifical lecture on “the refugee issue”, which is supposed to be so complex that no one can really grasp it.

“These unanswered questions that our society is asking,” said Hofmann, “are posed every day in thousands of faces: the faces of the incoming refugees. And every face presents its own individual story: different countries of origin, languages, cultures, religions, educational backgrounds.” He concluded with an appeal to the delegates’ humanity.

The significance of Hofmann’s vacuous oration became abundantly clear when it was immediately followed by the appearance of the German chancellor who was welcomed with “rapturous applause” (protocol) to the union conference. Directly referring to Hofmann’s speech, she profusely expressed her gratitude for the intensive and trustful cooperation between the government and the union over the past years.

Merkel stressed that she had always endeavoured to advance the principle of employer-employee co-determination at the workplace and always greatly appreciated the trade unions’ views on political issues. She said the unions in general and IG Metall in particular had “shown great social responsibility in the past”.

The IG Metall trade union conference clearly revealed the great extent to which the unions—in view of the crisis of capitalism and rapid encroachment of war—are integrating themselves into the German state and acting as a fifth column of the federal government.

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