

May Day 2019 in Germany: Trade unions call for support for the European Union

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One hundred and thirty years ago, the founding congress of the Second International issued a call for support for May Day as the “day of struggle of the worker’s movement.” Since then, May 1 has been associated by class-conscious workers with the struggle against exploitation and oppression based on the worldwide unity of the working class against capitalism.

The situation this year emphasises more than ever that such a struggle can only be carried out in an implacable struggle against the existing trade unions.

Instead of calling for the international unity of workers, the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) appeals for the unity of the government, big business and the European Union (EU) against workers. Its leaflet “On Labour Day” begins with the words: “If the European Union did not exist, it would have to be invented.” There then follows a glorified portrait of the EU, packed with lies.

According to the German unions, the EU has been ensuring peace in Europe for decades. The appeal makes no mention of the fact that all of the major EU states have been involved for years in brutal NATO-led wars in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan and many other countries. No mention is made of the gigantic military rearmament systematically under way in every EU state. Nothing is said about German government plans for nuclear armament and the building of an aircraft carrier; not a word about the fact that, for the first time since the end of World War II, German troops are again stationed on the border with Russia at a time when the militaristic policy of NATO and the EU threatens nuclear war.

The DGB’s claim that the EU is a force against “right-wing populists and nationalists” is a lie. In fact, the EU is a hotbed for nationalism, fascism and war. Right-wing extremist parties are now openly involved in government in 10 EU member states, while leading pro-EU politicians, such as French President Emmanuel Macron and European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, have spoken out in favour of fascist leaders like Philippe Pétain and Benito Mussolini.

The DGB also writes that the EU has brought “considerable benefits to the people of Germany and Europe,” such as the right to “work and travel freely.” Really? Are the refugees and asylum seekers, who are not allowed to travel anywhere, who are harassed by the state, terrorised and put into concentration camp-like facilities in order to deport them as soon as possible, not “people in Europe”? And what about the 142 million Europeans who, according to official figures, live in poverty—i.e., earn less than €813 [US\$911] a month—and can barely afford a hot meal twice a week? How can they afford to travel?

The complacent, well-fed bureaucrats in the German union headquarters go on to claim: “The EU protects and expands the rights of employees with regard to working hours, holidays, maternity leave and in many other areas of the world of work.”

The arrogance and mendacity of this statement is hard to beat. Studies by the Hans Böckler Foundation, which is a trade union think tank, disprove this claim and document the catastrophic effects of the EU’s expansion eastwards. In EU member Bulgaria, the average wage is eight times lower than in Germany.

In Germany itself, 12.9 million people live in poverty and 3.2 million have more than one job, because one wage is insufficient for survival. As for those with a “normal” wage, they confront prohibitively expensive rents, long journeys to work, rising workloads and job insecurity.

In France, workers are fighting against the introduction of new labour market laws based on Germany’s 2010 Agenda and the “Hartz reforms,” introduced 15 years ago by a Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green government in close coordination with the unions.

And what about workers in Greece? How did they benefit from the EU?

The euro has been used to plunder the economies of Europe’s weaker countries. Over the past five years, Germany has imposed an unrelenting series of austerity programmes on the Greek population. Millions of Greeks have lost their jobs, health care and much of their pensions.

There has been no comparable process of plundering and asset-stripping a country in peacetime, all undertaken with the full support of the DGB, the German government and the EU Troika.

The only true sentence in the DGB May Day appeal says: “Germany has also profited enormously from membership of the European Union.” Who, however, has profited in Germany? It is not workers, but rather the big corporations and banks. Since the international financial crisis 10 years ago, the number of billionaires in Europe and around the world has doubled, and their assets have risen by 11 percent annually. In contrast, incomes for the poorest half of the world’s population have been cut almost in half over the same period.

The crisis in Greece was undoubtedly lucrative for German banks and the German government. Between 2010 and 2017, Germany racked in €2.9 billion in its dealings in Greek government bonds—money that the German government used to boost its own budget.

With its unqualified support for the EU, the DGB is responding in its own reactionary way to the growing radicalisation of the population and the return of class struggle.

In France, the “yellow vest” movement continues undeterred. Hundreds of thousands protest every week against low pay, social inequality and the Macron government, despite massive police operations and a vicious hate campaign carried out in the media. In Poland, the week-long strike of more than 300,000 teachers rocked the ultra-right Law and Justice (PiS) government. It was the first national strike in Poland in decades and one of the biggest stoppages since the massive strike movement against the Stalinist dictatorship in the early 1980s.

On the same day last week that the Polish unions succeeded in suppressing the mass teachers walkout, pilots at Scandinavian Airline (SAS) went on strike in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In western and eastern Europe, resistance is growing to the worsening living and working conditions imposed in recent decades by the EU and its respective governments.

In the past few months, auto workers and other industrial workers have taken strike action in Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia and Kosovo. There have been mass protests against the so-called “slave law” introduced by the right-wing regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which forces workers to work unpaid overtime.

In Germany, tens of thousands of civil servants in Germany have taken part in short-term “warning” strikes to protest against the disastrous situation in schools, unbearable working conditions and miserable wages. In March, thousands of transport workers went on strike in Berlin and

brought the city to a standstill. At the beginning of April, 40,000 people in Berlin protested against rising rents and demanded the expropriation of real estate companies and hedge funds.

The well-heeled union officials, who sit on the boards of major corporations and banks and advise their managements, are gripped by fear. They feel threatened. They are well aware of the anger in factories and offices and the approaching storm of resistance. Following German reunification 30 years ago and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, they were able to suppress the class struggle in Europe and worldwide. This is becoming increasingly difficult. Social tensions have reached the breaking point, and opposition is growing ever stronger.

The DGB officials cling to the EU bureaucracy in the hope it will be able to establish a European police-state capable of suppressing the growing workers’ opposition movement. Back in 2012, the DGB sought to ally itself with the German army (Bundeswehr). Former DGB head Michael Sommer and the chairmen of all eight DGB-affiliated unions met with the German Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and agreed to work closely together. Sommer described the German army as an integral part of the peace movement.

Shortly afterwards, the German government announced that Germany’s period of military restraint was over, initiating a massive programme of military rearmament. The acting head of the DGB, Reiner Hoffmann, expressed his agreement. Since then, Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler, who advises the German government in matters of foreign and great power politics, and has called upon Germany to become the “taskmaster and paymaster” in Europe, has become a frequent speaker at union meetings and seminars.

The May Day appeal of the DGB in support of the EU is a wake-up call. It is high time to break from the union straitjacket and organise independently. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is participating in the European elections and is fighting to establish the United Socialist States of Europe. It calls for the setting up of independent action committees to connect workers across borders, organise joint activities and develop discussion on an international socialist programme.

Contact the SGP to support our election campaign and take part in the building of independent action committees!



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