German trade unions support military build-up and declare an industrial truce

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A few days after Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) announced a gigantic increase in the German military budget in the Bundestag (federal parliament) to frenetic applause from all parties, the trade unions signalled their approval.

Two days after the chancellor's war speech, the IG Metall (IGM) union and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) issued a joint statement, signed by IGM President Jörg Hofmann and BDI President Siegfried Russwurm. It says, "The top representatives of the BDI and the IGM, who are also co-founders of the 'Future of Industry' alliance, strongly support the sanctions against Russia imposed by the German government, the European Union and the Western allies."

IG Metall not only supports the war hysteria against Russia, but it also agrees to pass on the devastating economic consequences of the sanctions policy—skyrocketing fuel and energy prices, high inflation, layoffs, short-time working and wage losses—onto its members and stifle any resistance to them.

The sanctions would "also lead to disadvantages for Germany, its companies and employees," the joint statement says, which must be cushioned "as far as possible."

As at the beginning of the First World War, when the trade unions concluded an industrial truce with the Kaiser's imperial government and the employers' associations, today the unions are dropping any pretences that they are pursuing any other interests than those of the wealthy corporations and the German government. In this way, they are playing an integral role in the German state's preparation for a third world war.

Even clearer is a joint statement by IG Metall Baden-Württemberg and the Südwestmetall employers' organisation, which declares that it is Russia's military aggression which has necessitated and impressively produced a "united and determined" response by Germany, Europe and its allies. "We support the measures adopted," both organisations stress.

The joint statement leaves no doubt this will require a dramatic increase in military spending. The sanctions against Russia are expressly welcomed, despite their dire effects on the population in Russia and in Germany. "These measures will demand sacrifices from all of us," the highly paid union and business executives declare, knowing full well they won't have to do any "belt-tightening."

In its statement, the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) also supports the sanctions, stressing the "adverse consequences" of them "will not leave us unscathed." In addition to disrupting supply chains, Germany's high dependence on Russian natural gas, coal and oil imports was particularly problematic, it says. Through new "energy policy framework conditions," the government must ensure that "this dependence is significantly reduced."

Then the DGB issued its praises, saying, "The federal government has rightly reacted quickly to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, in terms of defence policy." This is unequivocal. On behalf of all eight individual trade unions, the DGB is supporting the biggest military rearmament programme since Hitler, and the massive weapons-running operation to Ukraine.

Well aware that they will encounter widespread opposition to the demands for more "sacrifice," the DGB leaders try to assuage anger by declaring, "The permanent increase in the arms budget to meet NATO's two percent [of GDP] target continues to be critically assessed by the DGB and its member unions." This massive increase, they say, must be weighed with "urgently needed future investments in the socio-ecological transformation and in the effectiveness of our welfare state."

In other words, the union sees its task as shaping the military build-up in such a way that it does not jeopardise the long-planned cuts in jobs, wages and social benefits associated with the "socio-ecological transformation" and increasing "effectiveness of our welfare state."

In an interview, IG Metall treasurer Jürgen Kerner put it in a nutshell: "Our priority has turned around within a week." The *Oberpfalz Medien* summarised his view by saying, "Of course, according to Jürgen Kerner, it is proper to support Ukraine with weapons now and to restore the Bundeswehr's [Armed Forces] military capability."

The trade unions are an inseparable part of the war coalition. They embrace the mendacious war propaganda of the government and the media, which places responsibility for the war exclusively with Putin and takes the Russian population hostage as a result. The well-paid bureaucrats in the union headquarters are hostile to a principled, left-wing position, which opposes Putin's reactionary invasion without giving any support to the warmongering by NATO and the US.

When NATO bombed Belgrade in 1999 and spread "Shock and Awe" in Baghdad with a days-long missile bombardment in 2003, no comparable protest was heard from the trade union offices. Nor did this happen when NATO planes devastated Libya in 2011. Nor do they say a word now about the fact that under the slogan 'Defend Ukraine!" the country is being filled with weapons and international mercenaries.

NATO has systematically provoked the current war through the military encirclement of Russia, the right-wing coup in Kiev eight years ago, in which fascistic forces played the leading role, and the arming of the Ukrainian military. After luring Russia into a trap, NATO is using the invasion to advance its strategy of regime change in Moscow, eliminating Russia as a strategic rival, and gaining unrestricted access to its vast mineral resources.

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For all the crocodile tears their representatives shed every day over the fate of the Ukrainian people, NATO is using them as pawns in a war it has been planning and preparing for years. Germany, the US and other imperialist powers are doing all of this without the slightest regard that they are bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war.

A principled opposition to the war, which opposes the Russian nationalism without adapting to imperialism, requires the unity of the workers in Ukraine, Russia, Germany and throughout the world. It does not advocate rearmament, but the disarmament of the capitalists and the dissolution of the military alliances through the revolutionary action of the international working class.

Such a perspective is a nightmare for the trade union bureaucrats, who no longer even speak of "solidarity" in Sunday speeches. They are nationalist to the core and the worst warmongers.

Back in 2014, the DGB reacted enthusiastically when Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), then foreign minister and now president, called for Germany to pursue a great power policy and take on more military responsibility internationally. To promote this policy, Steinmeier set up the website "Review 2014" at the time. One contribution came from the newly elected DGB leader Reiner Hoffmann, who unreservedly backed military rearmament.

Hoffmann's predecessor Michael Sommer maintained close contacts with the Bundeswehr, the armed forces of Germany. In a joint statement with the military, the DGB had the audacity to claim that unions and the Bundeswehr were both part of the country's "peace movement." Shortly afterwards, DGB officials participated in the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Bundeswehr's founding.

Support for war propaganda and military rearmament derives not only from the fact that many trade union officials are members of the SPD and of the Greens, which are both currently intensively pushing the development of war. Rather, the close collaboration with the government, state and army results from the nationalist and pro-capitalist politics of the trade unions, which are directed towards defending Germany's imperialist interests around the world.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Leon Trotsky explained the integration of the trade unions into the capitalist state. He wrote:

> There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social-Democratic, the Communist and "anarchist" trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards "growing together" is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common for all unions.
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> Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command. The capitalist cliques at the head of mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, etcetera, view economic life from the very same heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter. In their turn, the trade unions in the most important branches of industry find themselves deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises. They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power.
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> *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, Leon Trotsky, 1940

Trotsky's analysis was very far-sighted. The "tendency for the trade unions to grow together" with the state and the capitalist corporations continued after the Second World War. The global integration of the world economy and the rise of transnational production processes deprived the trade unions of the national ground upon which they could exert pressure for limited social reforms. This led to their final transformation. Instead of extracting concessions from the corporations, they became appendages of the state and the corporations, extracting concessions from the workers in the form of wage reductions and social cuts.

Support for rearmament, and war to secure raw material supplies, markets and access to cheap labour, is the logical continuation of this nationalist policy.

It is no coincidence that the German government—and the governments of other countries—are undertaking targeted measures and legislative initiatives to strengthen the trade unions and their workplace institutions. The unions' control over the working class is relevant to waging war.

But even before the war crisis, the level of class struggle in Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia was rising—and these struggles increasingly took the form of a rebellion against the corporatist trade unions. Over the last few years, autoworkers at VW in Slovakia (2017), Ford in Romania (2018), Mercedes Benz, BMW and Porsche in Germany (2018) and Audi in Hungary (2019) have walked out.

As the pandemic broke out, Siberian oil workers in Russia struck over horrific working conditions (2020) and Ukrainian doctors and nurses walked out over unpaid wages (2021). Over the last two years, German metal, health care, meatpacking and logistics workers, along with educators and students, have been in the forefront of the fight against the ruling class' policy of prioritising profit over life.

The demands for even more "sacrifice" for war, along with the impact of rising inflation and efforts by the state and the unions to suppress class conflict will provoke even greater resistance by the working class. To take this forward, workers must break with the nationalist and pro-war unions and build independent rank-and-file committees.

The building of such committees, democratically controlled by workers and committed to the unity of workers around the world, will link the growing resistance against social attacks, the pandemic and the threat of a Third World War, into a global counteroffensive by the working class for socialism.

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