

"Of course I am afraid that the conflict will escalate into a nuclear war"

Workers and youth in Germany speak out against Ukraine war and NATO aggression

Our reporters
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The Ukraine war has opened a deep divide in German society. The government is demanding sacrifices for “freedom and democracy,” but the hysteria with which it calls for ever new sanctions, weapons deliveries and armaments projects finds little resonance in the working class. In workplaces, at supermarkets and in working class neighbourhoods, the mood is quite different. However, this finds no expression in politicians’ speeches or in the reporting of the bourgeois media.

The leaders of the “traffic light” coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens have unleashed an avalanche of war hysteria against Russia. They are spending an additional €100 billion on equipping the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and supplying the Ukrainian army with tanks and missiles. And to finance all this, workers are supposed to make “sacrifices.” Former German president Joachim Gauck demands, “We can freeze for freedom for once.” And Federal Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Greens) recommends every household cut back its energy spending by ten percent, as a “rule of thumb.”

WSWS reporters have been talking with workers and young people across Germany and inviting them to the International Online May Day Rally. It soon became clear the war propaganda is finding little traction with working people, who have lived through two years of the coronavirus pandemic and are now in a third year of deliberate mass infection. They have been hit particularly hard by skyrocketing prices for petrol and food. In addition, many workers have Russian colleagues, friends and relatives, or they themselves come from the Balkans or other regions of the world that have been ravaged by NATO wars.

“Freedom—No, what freedom?” comments Berlin skilled trades worker Magdalena on Gauck’s demand. “Freedom has no such price,” she continues. Just leaving the supermarket, she noted, “At the end of last year, I could still do a week’s shopping for a family of three for €30. Today that is just enough for about two days.” Referring to the rampant levels of social inequality, she said, “War or no war, crisis or no crisis, a Green politician, a junior politician who rabble-rouses in the Bundestag, earns €14,000 a month. I come home with just under €1,900.”

“They are taking [money] away from those who work in

education and care,” an educator commented. “It’s used to fund arms. I work in a kindergarten. Educators are on their last legs, especially with the independent education providers. We did not get a coronavirus bonus; we did not get a Berlin supplement.”

Construction worker Sead agreed, “I work on a construction site as an electrician, my wife works in a kindergarten. To make ends meet, we both have to work hard.” He confirms that the noticeably higher prices for food and energy are hitting the family hard. Regarding the rearmament of the Bundeswehr to the tune of €100 billion, he says that it comes “as a surprise, we are simply presented with a fait accompli. I come from Bosnia; I know what war means. The consequences are still visible today.”

Hakan, who works in a call centre, also picked up on the topic of inflation and Gauck’s demagogic demand for workers to freeze for Ukraine. “The price increases are already very noticeable; especially some foodstuffs such as coffee and oil. Ancillary costs such as electricity, energy, heating have also become more expensive. Governments in Europe claim this is the ‘price of freedom,’” he continued, “The question is, what do they mean by freedom, and whether it is all really freedom? Are we supposed to believe everything written in the newspapers?” The economy, Hakan said, is also “not democratic.” For example, it was wrong that the price of foodstuffs such as wheat “are determined by a market that speculates on them,” he added.

In Munich, too, the working class is seething. During a shift change at the BMW factory many workers stopped to comment on our flyers.

“Where is the €100 billion for the Bundeswehr coming from all of a sudden now?” asked Marco, a BMW worker. “For two years there has been a lack of money everywhere in the pandemic: there are no air filters for children in schools and too few teachers. The hospitals are overloaded. But for the Bundeswehr—they get 100 billion?!” Adna also wondered, “Why wasn’t it possible to raise 100 billion for care during the pandemic?”

“They did not spend that much money during the whole coronavirus pandemic,” says Dragan, a worker with Yugoslav roots. In his opinion, the Bundeswehr’s massive armaments spending indicates “that Germany is pursuing its own advantages in Ukraine—like the USA.” One should not believe everything one

hears, says Dragan. “Eighty percent of what you hear in the media about the Ukraine war is wrong.” In any case, his impression was that the media reporting was “completely coordinated.”

Workers are taking the threat of a third world war seriously. “Those at the top do not think about what comes afterwards!” a younger worker said, joining in the conversation with Dragan, “they only care about their own interests. They are waging war with the intention of gaining control over Russia. Like twice before in history, this could lead to world war. Only now they are risking nuclear war.”

André, another BMW worker, thought the SGP's proposal that workers organise independently and intervene together in events was something new and unusual, but good. Social uprisings in other countries, for example in Sri Lanka, were not mentioned in the media, “They do not want to hear about that at all.”

In front of a Munich supermarket in the Moosach district, WSWS reporters talked to Maria, who supported the international perspective of the May Day campaign. She hopes, she said, to hear factual news about China and Brazil. She feels that the current news is more like war dispatches. “It all makes me sick and sad.”

Passerby Yela said, as a taxpayer, she could also say a word about what taxpayers' money was being used for, “Weapons are not okay!” She added, “You do not help anyone with more and more weapons. And the population has to pay for all this.” She already spends “more than half of my salary on rent,” even though she works a lot. “At the end of the month I have nothing left.”

In front of a supermarket in Stuttgart, it was clear many people fiercely reject the increasing campaign of Russophobia. One shopper pointed out that “Putin's invasion is probably now meant to serve as a pretext for a war against Russia. If not, they would not be sending heaps of weapons to Ukraine.” Pascal, a young printer, said the anti-Russian campaign was just sick. It reminded him of the hate campaign against Muslim refugees. Pascal said he wanted “to know more about the war, especially the historical background,” and was very interested in the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the analysis of the WSWS.

On Marienplatz, a Serbian worker explained he was not a Putin supporter and is against the invasion of Ukraine. “But for the German government, it is not about ending the war in Ukraine and saving the people,” he continued. “All the propaganda is directed against Russia, which means that a war against Russia is being prepared here.” The constant coverage of alleged massacres in Bucha and Mariupol reminded him of the atrocity propaganda spread before the Yugoslav war.

War and massive armaments spending are causing many young people to take an interest in politics. This is what a WSWS team found when they talked to students on the North Campus of Humboldt University in Berlin. For the most part, those we spoke to were firmly against war.

“War is never a solution,” said Lara, a medical student at the Charité hospital. She agreed that none of the wars waged by the US and NATO in the last 30 years have brought anything progressive. She pointed to the hypocrisy that is evident with the Ukraine war on the refugee issue. “There are two different yardsticks being used,” she said, to distinguish between welcome

and unwelcome refugees. “That already shows that the ruling class here acts according to its own interests.”

The WSWS team spoke to three students from Essen who were visiting the Berlin campus over the Easter holidays. The three 11th graders, Laura, Clara, and Jens, belong to a generation of young people who have grown up knowing only a time of unending wars waged by US imperialism and its allies.

For the past two years, they have experienced first-hand the devastating herd immunity policies of the grand coalition and the traffic light coalition. They all pointed to the dangers of the situation, expressing their fears of nuclear war. “Of course I'm afraid that the war will escalate into a nuclear confrontation,” said Clara. Laura agreed, with Jens adding, “Russia is certainly not looking for a direct conflict with NATO. That would be illogical and unwise.” Besides, “Russia itself has shown a willingness to join NATO in the past.”

Referring to US imperialism's preparations for a confrontation with China, Jens said, “Russia and China have been systematically isolated from the world community.” He pointed out that US ruling circles have been planning for the possible use of smaller, tactical nuclear weapons for years. These could supposedly be used “selectively” to eliminate an opponent's defences in one blow—a truly perfidious conception, he said. “Mini-nukes won't help anyone!” Jens remarked firmly. The mere fact that the US and Russia—the two biggest nuclear powers in the world—were confronting each other gave the fight against militarism a vital dimension.

Against this background, the young students rejected Germany's aggressive military spending. The arms deliveries were an “additional, even unnecessary provocation against Putin.” The three students found it particularly disturbing that arms deliveries to Ukraine would also fall into the hands of fascist forces such as the Azov Battalion. As Jens said, “This also provides Putin with fodder for his claims that Russia is fighting fascists in Ukraine.”

Laura, who herself has Russian roots and has relatives living in Russia, spoke about the impact of the war and the sanctions on her family. “Because this war is raging, my relatives and friends in Russia have to suffer the economic impact. It is not their fault. Most of the population doesn't want war.” She said she was appalled that the image of the Slavic subhuman was now being conjured up again by politicians and in the media when it comes to Russia. Racist attacks on Russians and others are on the increase she noted. “No one should be discriminated against because of their origin. Everyone should be welcome, no matter where they come from.”



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