

The German trade unions hold their war congress

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11 May 2022

The German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) is meeting in Berlin May 8 through 12. The gathering of 400 top DGB officials and its eight affiliated unions, which pompously calls itself the “Parliament of Labour,” is completely dominated by war and military rearmament this year.

The growing opposition to rearmament and war and the increasing unrest in many workplaces in the face of galloping inflation, rising energy costs and production stoppages due to supply bottlenecks, means the German government considers the trade unions as an important ally to keep the working class under control, suppress the class struggle and implement its war policy.

While it is not new for leading politicians to deliver greetings at the DGB Congress, this time there was no end to the political parade. The top representatives of the state and the government joined hands.

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier kicked things off on Sunday. He gave the opening speech of the congress. Chancellor Olaf Scholz followed on Monday. Then came Labour Minister Hubertus Heil, followed by Berlin's Mayor Franziska Giffey—all members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Just a few days earlier, the chancellor had been shouted down by anti-war activists at a May Day rally and Giffey had been pelted with eggs. At the DGB congress, on the other hand, they were most welcome. Their speeches were greeted with sustained applause and sometimes with standing ovations.

President Steinmeier spoke on May 8. He used the anniversary of the surrender of the Wehrmacht (Nazi armed forces) and the end of the war to justify the strongest military build-up since Hitler and a massive expansion of the proxy war against Russia.

He began his speech with a characterisation of the end of the Second World War as it has been usually understood until now. May 8, he said, was a “day of gratitude” (to the then Allies in West and East who defeated Hitler); it was a “day of remembrance” (of the horrors of Nazi rule); it was a “day of admonition” (no line should be drawn under remembrance); it was also a “day of hope” (that the battle cry “Never again war in Europe!” would be permanently implemented).

But the “dream of a common European house” had turned into a nightmare. “This 8 May is a day of war,” Steinmeier cried. The war was an “epochal break.” The trade union congress was “overshadowed and marked by it.”

Steinmeier repeated the term “epoch break” no less than six times. And he left no doubt as to what he meant by it. The epoch

that had begun with the surrender of the Wehrmacht and the end of the Second World War, and during which Germany had been forced to exercise a certain military restraint, had come to an end.

To justify the fact that German tanks were rolling against Russia again and that the German government had decided on the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler, Steinmeier and all the other government representatives who spoke after him repeated the mendacious war propaganda that is currently being spread through all media channels from morning to night.

Putin wanted to “wipe out” Ukraine. He was not only violating Ukraine’s borders but denying its right to exist. Without using the words “war of annihilation,” the term describing the Nazi’s genocidal campaign against the Soviet Union, Steinmeier placed Putin alongside Hitler as a war criminal. With his war of aggression, Putin had definitively destroyed the “foundation of the European order that kept the peace, which we built after the Second World War and the Cold War.”

The attack on Ukraine was an attack “on the idea of liberal democracy and on the values upon which it is based: Freedom, equality, respect for human rights and human dignity.” The German government’s response was “clear and unequivocal.” It supported Ukraine with weapons, money and every form of assistance it needed to repel the Russian attack. This was a matter of solidarity, Steinmeier declared.

Not a word about the criminal wars NATO has waged in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya over the last three decades. Not a word about the systematic expansion of NATO to the East, which even a Russian head of state other than Putin would have perceived as an existential threat. Not a word about the right-wing coup in Kiev eight years ago, in which Steinmeier was personally involved. Not a word about the preparations for a military reconquest of Crimea, the thwarting of any possible compromise and the flooding of Ukraine with weapons, which has long since turned the conflict into a NATO proxy war against Russia.

Instead, the call was for “living solidarity” with Ukraine. To the applause of the assembled officials, Steinmeier demanded the DGB and its individual unions support the government war policy and suppress any resistance by the working class to the “sacrifices” involved.

Accordingly, Steinmeier said, “Solidarity, that means putting economic pressure on Russia, with drastic sanctions such as we have never imposed in the history of the EU. Solidarity, that also

means that we have to bear burdens, and for a long time.”

By “epochal change” he also meant “a very concrete question. How do we manage the burdens we already have to bear?” What was at stake was nothing less than “the cohesion of our country.” Interrupted supply chains, rising prices for food, exploding energy and fuel costs, for many people, “the consequences of the war are already being felt very directly and hard.”

Many people were afraid. Fear “of inflation, of a recession. And of losing their jobs—who would know that better than you in the trade unions.” How to end dependence on Russian energy imports without threatening entire industries and putting hundreds of thousands of jobs at risk, “That’s what you’re all concerned about. I know that,” Steinmeier stressed.

In addition, there were the technological changes and transformation in many areas of production and administration. He said everything must be done to maintain the cohesion of society and to prevent the influence of “populists of any colour.” “You, the DGB with its individual trade unions, you have a very central role and a lot of responsibility in this transformation,” Steinmeier stressed, adding, “I have great confidence in you.”

The role of the trade unions as the police force of the corporations and government, which suppress all resistance against exploitation, profiteering and war, could not be formulated more clearly.

This was followed by a eulogy for Reiner Hoffmann, the previous DGB leader, who retired at the congress due to age.

In 2014, the DGB had already reacted enthusiastically when Steinmeier, as foreign minister, called for Germany to pursue a great power policy and take on more military responsibility internationally once again. The then newly elected DGB leader Hoffmann had written a contribution for the website Review 2014, which Steinmeier had set up to promote this policy. Hoffmann gave his unqualified support to military rearmament.

Michael Sommer, Hoffmann's predecessor, had already maintained close contacts with the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). Under him, in all seriousness, the DGB and Bundeswehr had claimed in a joint declaration they were both part of the peace movement. A short time later, the DGB participated in the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Bundeswehr.

That the trade unions support the return of German great power politics and military rearmament is not new. But the integration of the trade unions into the state apparatus and the government reached a new dimension at this year’s DGB national congress.

Chancellor Scholz also blew the horn of war propaganda and called on the DGB to cooperate more closely. Labour Minister Heil stressed that the previous government, in which he was also labour minister, had already done much to strengthen the influence of the trade unions and their works councils. He said that he would now continue to do so to a greater extent.

The fusion of the trade unions with the government and state institutions is also reflected in the choice of the new DGB chairperson. Yasmin Fahimi comes directly from the SPD and government establishment. She was variously SPD general secretary, state secretary in the Federal Ministry of Labour and a Member of Parliament. At the same time, she is the partner of

Michael Vassiliadis, president of the Mining, Chemical and Energy Workers' Union (IG BCE), which has always represented the conservative right wing of the DGB.

At the congress, Fahimi announced she would expand the power and influence of the DGB. But workers are increasingly seeing the unions for what they really are—bureaucratic apparatuses financed by the government and by the corporations through the Supervisory Boards, suppressing the class struggle by all means. More and more workers are voting with their feet and resigning. At the turn of the millennium, the DGB still had 7.7 million members; today there are more than 2 million fewer.

The growing integration of the unions into the state and into the management of capitalist corporations has deep objective causes. The global integration of the world economy and transnational production processes have deprived the trade unions of the national ground on which they could exert pressure for limited social reforms. This has led to their transformation. Instead of extracting concessions from the corporations, they have become 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 supplies of raw materials, markets and access to cheap labour is the logical extension of this nationalist policy.

The control of the trade unions over the working class is vital to conducting war. The struggle against war therefore requires a break with the nationalist unions. The building of independent rank-and-file Action Committees is now gaining great importance in linking the growing resistance against social attacks, against the policy of deliberate mass infection with COVID-19 and the threat of a third world war, and launching a global counteroffensive.



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