

May Day in Germany: Union officials and government politicians united against the working class

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This year's May Day rallies held by the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) took place under extraordinary circumstances: Real wages are in free fall—in the 3rd and 4th quarters of 2022 they were on average 5.4 percent lower than in the same period the previous year, according to the Federal Statistical Office. As a result, fierce class battles are developing across Europe, especially in France, where Macron's police are cracking down on peaceful rallies with tremendous brutality. And in Ukraine, NATO and the German government are pushing for a "spring offensive" that threatens to lead to a nuclear world war.

In the face of this explosive situation, the DGB and its individual unions used the traditional May Day rallies to demonstrate their unqualified solidarity with the federal and state governments, their pro-war policies and the attacks on wages and jobs. Therein lay the real meaning of their official motto, "Unbroken solidarity."

Union officials and government politicians were largely speaking to themselves at the rallies. According to the DGB, which apparently counted very accurately, 287,880 people attended its 398 official May Day events. That's 720 per rally and only one in twenty of the DGB's 5.6 million members, whose numbers have nearly halved in the last 30 years.

So, all the more government politicians took part in the rallies—and not only from the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, who are traditionally close to the unions, but also from the Christian Democrats (CDU).

North-Rhine Westphalia's state Prime Minister Hendrik Wüst (CDU), who has ambitions for the chancellorship, marched behind a DGB banner in the Duisburg demonstration and then addressed the rally. In Saxony, state Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer took part, and in Berlin the newly elected governing Mayor Kai Wegner,

both right-wing CDU politicians.

Numerous leading representatives of the SPD appeared at the DGB rallies together with union chiefs as keynote speakers. For example, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Rhineland-Palatinate state Prime Minister Malu Dreyer spoke in Koblenz, Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser in Herborn, Hesse, Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil in Wolfsburg and SPD Chairman Lars Klingbeil in Lehrte near Hanover.

All the speakers lied through their teeth, while at the same time pledging to work even more closely together.

DGB Chairwoman Yasmin Fahimi declared at the central rally in Cologne: "Only with strong unions and our collective agreements can we do something to counter the greed for profit. And only with us—not against us—will we succeed in stopping climate change in time and successfully transforming our economy—with good, new jobs."

She said this after the DGB unions and their company officials have supported the Hartz welfare and labour "reforms" and every social cut for two decades, agreed on countless layoffs and to massive cuts in real wages!

Chancellor Scholz called for "respect for work," which was "indispensable for our democracy and for our togetherness." According to Scholz, this also included "fair wages."

Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, who as negotiator for the public sector employers wants to impose a massive reduction in real wages on the 2.5 million federal, state and local government employees, was furious "that in Hesse, it is still the parents' purse that decides whether their daughter or son is successful at school."

The head of service union Verdi, Frank Wernecke, who spoke in Frankfurt, was particularly wild. He began with a

declaration of solidarity for Ukraine and a savage denunciation of Russia, which he accused of using the mass rape of Ukrainian women as a weapon. However, in the face of widespread opposition to the German government's pro-war policy—"even in the unions there are different opinions on what is the best way to end this war"—Werneke had to distance himself from NATO's goal of spending two percent of economic output on armaments.

In practical terms, however, this means nothing. For years, Verdi has been ensuring that wages in the public sector are lowered to finance armaments spending. As early as 2020, the union had agreed to a 28-month contract for federal and local government workers that meant only a 3.2 percent increase in basic rates. The consumer price index, however, rose by 16.1 percent during this period, corresponding to a reduction in real wages of almost 13 percent.

After more than half a million had taken part in warning strikes, Verdi agreed a new contract which its members are now being "consulted" about. This provides for an increase of only 5.5 percent on basic pay rates plus €200 over the next 24 months. With an annual inflation rate of eight percent, this means a further reduction in real wages of around ten percent. Thanks to Verdi's collective bargaining policies, federal and local government employees will thus lose around a quarter of their real income within five years! If one considers the particularly high price increases for energy, food, and rents, on which workers spend most of their money, the loss in real wages is even greater.

No wonder that all the rally speakers—from Scholz to Fahimi, to the functionaries from the second row—emphasized the importance of "collectively agreed wages and collective bargaining." The unions are needed to suppress a rebellion against this wage robbery.

Werneke even brazenly claimed: "The best and ultimately only way to offset the rising cost of living is and remains strong wage and salary increases. That's what we as DGB unions are standing up for."

He then praised the miserable wage settlements at Deutsche Post and in the public sector, shouting, "The unions are back. We are successful in labour disputes," knowing he would face no protests from the well-paid officials and pseudo-left union toadies gathered at the rally.

Finally, Werneke got onto his favourite topic, which hardly any speaker omitted to talk about: "Expanding co-determination." This legally-enshrined system is the

livelihood of the union bureaucracy, which makes a lot of money through its posts on company supervisory boards and works councils, while bleeding its members—and non-members—dry.

Just as the DGB's May Day call did not contain a syllable about the struggles in France, where millions have been protesting Macron's pension cuts for three months, so these were not worth saying a word about by the rally speakers. This powerful class struggle movement, as WSWS has already commented on, has thrown the German union bureaucracy into a panic. It fears that the French workers' combativeness will infect its own members. The DGB had already accepted similar pension cuts without resistance more than ten years ago.

The official May Day rallies once again underscore the reactionary character of the unions. Whereas during the economic upswing of the post-war period they had still fought for some social improvements within the framework of their policy of "social partnership" and co-determination, in the past decades they have completely gone over to the camp of the class enemy. In the name of "competitiveness" and "defending [German] production locations," they subordinate the interests of workers to the interests of capital in the global competitive battle between corporations. They regard the workers of other countries not as colleagues but as opponents and competitors.

Only the pseudo-left lackeys of the bureaucracy, who themselves strive for lucrative posts, can still claim today that these reactionary, ossified organisations can be reformed in the interests of the workers.

The alternative to this was shown by the online May Day rally of the International Committee of the Fourth International. This combined the call for building of independent action committees with a socialist program that unites the working class of all countries in the struggle against social inequality, war, and capitalism.



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