

Germany: “Renewing the Trade Unions” conference defends the bureaucracy

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The German Left Party’s think tank, the erroneously named Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, held a conference May 12-14. The conference, titled “Renewing the Trade Unions,” assembled around 1,500 trade union officials and representatives of the Left Party, plus numerous pseudo-left organisations, at the Ruhr University in Bochum for panel discussions, 25 working groups and countless workshops.

The conference took place at a time when more and more workers are coming into conflict with the unions and are striving to break free from their stranglehold in order to fight for their interests.

The former reformist workers organisations have long since ceased to represent workers’ interests. The well-paid union bureaucrats work closely with the country’s major companies on the supervisory boards set up in accordance with Germany’s corporatist system of “co-determination” and “social partnership.” The union’s cooperation with the German government, aimed at slashing jobs and lowering wages, is at the heart of the bureaucracy’s support for the Concerted Action program and Hartz IV laws, which have led to a huge increase in precarious forms of work and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the steel industry, hospitals and schools.

The transformation of the unions into a police force for the corporations and the government reached a new stage with the coronavirus pandemic and the Ukraine war. Union leaders support the German government’s rearmament programme and are doing all they can to pass on its gigantic costs to the workers. The union bureaucrats have recently agreed contracts in the postal service and public services at a national and local level, which will reduce incomes by 20, 30 or even 50 percent within a few years against the backdrop of horrendous price increases.

The conference in Bochum served to justify this and prevent a rebellion from below. It had the task of forging alliances against workers (via “networking”) and working out the mechanisms and arguments with which the attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions can be justified and enforced.

If the organisers had been honest, they would have called their congress “Defending the Trade Unions.” Despite all the pseudo-leftist babble about “trade union renewal”—i.e., reforming the unions in the interests of the members—the aim of the conference was to defend the unions’ reactionary policies.

Senior representatives of the trade union bureaucracy were welcomed with open arms at the congress. Hans-Jürgen Urban, executive member of IG Metall, gave a keynote speech on “Trade union policy in the polycrisis of capitalism.” Christine Behle, deputy chairperson of the Verdi union and responsible for the latest wage cuts in the public sector, discussed with Felicitas Heinisch of “Fridays for Future” and Janine Wissler, chairperson of the Left Party, about “How to organise a socially acceptable transformation of the transport industry,” i.e., how best, along with IG Metall, to advance the destruction of jobs in the car industry.

Heinz Bierbaum, chairman of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, praised the role of Verdi in the disputes by postal and public service workers: “The industrial action at the post office was particularly remarkable. Here there was a strike ballot in which an overwhelming majority voted for an indefinite strike.” Bierbaum “forgot” to mention that Verdi overrode the vote of the membership and enforced wage cuts. According to Bierbaum: “The results achieved so far in the bargaining rounds are respectable.”

The hostility at the conference to exploited workers was exemplified by the unsuccessful attempt by two Bulgarian migrant workers to promote their cause. They are campaigning for an investigation into the death of 26-year-old temporary worker Refat Süleyman, who died last year on the Thyssenkrupp Stahl factory premises in Duisburg in circumstances that remain unexplained. Their request for an investigation was brusquely rejected by the organisers, and the workers received no support from conference participants. We will report on this in a separate article.

Fanny Zeise, “Speaker for trade union renewal” at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, stressed in her statements and

interviews that the aim of the conference was to strengthen the trade union apparatus against opposition from the working class in the stormy period ahead. “One of the recipes for success of the conferences is that they do not take ideological-programmatic questions as their starting point,” she wrote. What is important is that “critical positions are not formulated in a sectarian and backward-looking way, but in a sense of solidarity, looking forward and aimed at strengthening the trade unions.”

The trade union conferences of the Left Party stemmed from an initiative of Bernd Riexinger, former Verdi functionary and a former co-chair of the Left Party. From its inception, the aim of the first conference, held in Stuttgart in 2013, was to strengthen the trade union apparatus against workers.

In 2013 the veteran union bureaucrat Uwe Meinhardt opened the conference. He was the leading representative of IG Metall in Stuttgart and now sits on the IG Metall executive. Meinhardt had stressed that strikes must remain the monopoly of the trade unions and any independent movement by the workers was illegitimate. They could not be allowed to determine whether a strike was right or wrong.

This remains the trade unions’ position today. At the post office, Verdi overrode the vote of 100,000 members who voted for strike action. Instead, a handful of bargaining committee officials decided on the wage cuts, which are rejected by the majority of workers.

The pseudo-left groups that orbit the Left Party, and were represented at the conference, cheered on the bureaucracy’s manoeuvres.

The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) reported on “moving moments.” It enthusiastically described a “shop steward and his group from the EVG (railworkers union) shouting out to the hall on Sunday, i.e., after the unspeakable settlement to call off the strike, that the EVG had said goodbye to social partnership.” The Socialist Alternative Voran (SAV) cheered: “When [IGM executive member] Urban spoke of the need for the perspective of international socialism, the auditorium went wild with loud applause.”

This adulation is absurd. The EVG has served the railways as a house union for decades, Urban is a steadfast IG Metall apparatchik. The EVG, IG Metall, IG BCE and Verdi are all bound by a thousand threads to the corporations and the government and brutally enforce their directives against workers.

This is also true of their pseudo-left defenders, all of whom support the NATO war against Russia, the rearmament of German imperialism and the policy of cuts that goes with it. As the WSWS has written, “Despite occasional criticism of the leadership, these organisations are an integral part of the trade union apparatus. They do

everything they can to whitewash the deals struck and tighten up the union straitjacket. More than anything else, they fear the independent movement of the working class.”

The trade unions have been on the right wing of the labour movement since their emergence in the 19th century. With the globalisation of production from the 1980s onwards, they have been transformed from reformist workers’ organisations that negotiated limited improvements within the framework of capitalism into direct instruments of the state and corporations. Many workers have since turned away from the unions, which they describe as “mafias.”

It is impossible, under the conditions of capitalist crisis and the growing threat of war, to turn the bureaucratic apparatuses back into workers’ organisations. The defence of workers’ interests demands a rebellion against the trade unions. New organisations must be built, controlled by the rank and file, which reject social partnership and are ready to fight.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has therefore taken the initiative to build action committees and created the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to network them internationally.

These committees give a voice and a perspective to the growing opposition of the working class against social attacks as well as the escalation of the war in Ukraine. They connect the struggles of workers worldwide across workplaces, branches of industry and countries. All over the world workers face the same attacks from governments and unions. They can only defend themselves by building a European and international movement against the policies of cuts and war and for socialism.



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