Germany: “Renewing the Trade Unions” conference refuses to support temporary workers

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Two Bulgarian workers Ferat and Nasko tried in vain to win the support of participants at the Left Party’s recent “Renewing the Trade Unions” conference. Both men are members of the association “Stolipinovo in Europe,” named after a district of the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv, which is renowned for its great diversity but also for its cultural and economic discrimination.

They had sought to inform the conference about their miserable working conditions as temporary agency workers, and in particular the case of 26-year-old Refat Süleyman. Refat Süleyman died last year as a temporary worker on the premises of Thyssenkrupp Stahl in Duisburg under unexplained circumstances. The company, local authorities, the trade union IG Metall and its works council have all shown no interest in uncovering the circumstances and background of his death.

Ferat and Nasko were brusquely dismissed by the organisers of the conference. They were also rebuffed by the participants in the workshop in which they planned to speak. Ferat and Nasko wanted to ask the union members in the workshop to support the following demands: a “humane working environment” for migrant workers in temporary work, compliance with “legally prescribed health and safety measures,” an “investigation into the network of subcontractors employing ThyssenKrupp’s industrial cleaning staff,” an end to temporary work at Thyssenkrupp Stahl and for “regular contracts, with safe working hours, the necessary safety training and health checks, supplemented by guaranteed health and social security contributions.”

These are demands that even the most right-wing trade unionist would have agreed to a few decades ago. Today the same demands are out of the question for the unions and their pseudo-left defenders, who have turned into direct accomplices of the corporations and government. They react to any flare-up of the class struggle with extreme hostility.

We spoke to Ferat and Nasko about their attempt to rally support at the conference.

WSWS: Thank you very much for your time. Perhaps you could briefly introduce yourselves to our readers?

Ferat: I am 45 years old and live in Gelsenkirchen with my wife and three children. I have now started working for Hermes as a delivery driver. Like Nasko, I come from Stolipinovo. This is normally a very lively district in the Balkans, involving many cultures, including members of the Turkish-speaking Muslim community and Roma. Due to high unemployment and low wages, however, most of the people there are moving to other European countries to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Nasko: I am 31 years old and live in Duisburg with four children. I am currently unemployed. I also worked as a courier driver before, at Amazon. I was made redundant there because of a lack of work. Now I’m looking for work again.

WSWS: What was the reason for founding your association “Stolipinovo in Europa e. V.”?

Ferat: We founded the association in Bulgaria as a solidarity association during the period of Corona. Many people had no work at that time, so we supported each other. When we came to Germany, we realised that 95 percent of us were still treated badly. We thought we were social outsiders in Bulgaria, that only there was xenophobia. But here in Germany it’s not

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much different.

Nasko: We founded the association to protect and defend ourselves. In general, we are denied human rights. Many of us are treated badly at work. The situation for Bulgarian, Romanian and other migrant workers is extremely bad.

WSWS: At the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation trade union conference, you also wanted to draw attention to the fate of Refat Süleyman, who died while working at the Thyssenkrupp plant in Duisburg. Did you know him?

Nasko: He was not a personal friend, but we are all from the same part of town and feel like family. Everyone says he was a good man who wanted the best for his children and that's why he came to Duisburg.

WSWS: How are his wife and children doing now?

Nasko: They live on job centre benefits. His wife is doing very badly, she has severe depression, after the death she suffered a mental collapse. The children are still small, they don't understand everything and don't get to know much yet. But they find out later.

WSWS: When did you ask the conference organisers to let you speak?

Ferat: We had to register to attend the conference beforehand, but as simple participants. On Sunday we asked if we could speak in the workshop. They told us they needed half an hour for consultation but then they did not allow us to speak. They said by way of justification that this was their conference and only their members could make speeches. We, as participants, could only ask questions. We did not get any support from the other participants. They did not even want to give us the five minutes we had asked for.

We asked them, why don't you help us in the case of Refat Suleyman? They answered by turning us away. I guess they didn't let us speak because IG Metall works closely with Thyssenkrupp. Yet I believe that union officials from Thyssenkrupp were represented at the conference.

This is impossible: a young man dies on the Thyssenkrupp factory premises and nobody answers our questions. His death is still unexplained. We would like to know why Thyssenkrupp and the union are content with saying that nothing can be found out. They don't say it wasn't an industrial accident, they don't say it was a homicide, nothing. But in the end a young man is dead.

Nasko: There are cameras everywhere in the factory, but still they don't want to say anything. They would know how Refat died. When someone dies outside of work, everything is done to find out who did it or the circumstances. But here they are quick to say that nothing can be found out. We don't believe that.

Thyssenkrupp is a big company, there are cameras everywhere. If he had stolen anything, they would be able to prove it immediately, but when he dies, they don't want to know.

Ferat: It's mainly about the role of the subcontractors, Refat worked for Eleman and OPS and was on hire from the firm Buchen Umweltservice.

When the search was underway for Refat, I spoke to the head of Refat's company. Refat was supposed to go to with the bus for breakfast, which was only 100 metres away. There were supposedly no dangerous places on the way.

Normally the workers always have to go in pairs. Now he was allowed to go alone. Why can a worker who has only been working on the factory premises for three days walk alone? Or was he working, alone? He was employed as a cleaner. We suspect he was working alone, and not on break. I believe they claimed that for their own protection.

His body was then found at Gate 4. He was working at Gate 2. Normally you couldn't go to Gate 4 alone for security reasons. How was it possible for him? They have CCTV cameras, even if one is broken, there are others. If they say they're all broken, we think that's a lie. They have to show where Refat was working on his last day. At least one camera must be working.

We did not get any explanations to our questions. In a "normal" case of death, they could certainly prove what happened.

The family and their lawyer have still not received the autopsy report. Why have they kept the report secret for seven months? It is strange.

Refat was murdered. Maybe not by one person, but he was definitely a victim of murderous working conditions.

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