

German IG Metall union congress intensifies support for war and austerity

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Last week's congress of the German industrial union IG Metall, which ended on Thursday in Frankfurt am Main, makes clear the response of the union leadership to growing opposition to cuts in social spending, to the rearmament of the military and to war. While millions of people are expressing their opposition to the Israeli government's brutal genocide against the Palestinians, the union is strengthening its cooperation with the German government and supporting the latter's war policies.

While Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens), at the meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg, was rejecting a ceasefire in Gaza and justifying genocide against the Palestinians, union delegates in Frankfurt welcomed Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats, SPD) with cheers and applause.

The terror of the Israeli government's brutal bombing of the Palestinians has sparked mass protests around the world, coinciding with a growing strike movement. In the US, auto workers were on strike for much of the fall; in the UK, union leaders have struggled to stifle strikes by postal and rail workers; in France, there have been mass protests against the Macron government's pension cuts; and in Germany, the collective bargaining struggle for 3 million state public sector workers is beginning.

IG Metall, the largest union in Germany, is responding to this growing strike movement and radicalization of workers by closing ranks with the federal government.

Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Greens) spoke on the opening day of the union congress, followed by Chancellor Scholz on Tuesday, with Labor and Social Affairs Minister Hubertus Heil (SPD) speaking at the conclusion. One and all they praised the union, stressed the importance of the close cooperation heretofore, and called for even closer cooperation "in view of the challenges ahead" (Scholz).

In the statement of principles for the trade union congress, titled "Where we stand. Where we want to go," the IG Metall executive board formulated its agreement with the government's war policy. It calls this "responsible policy for peace and security."

After a few pacifist phrases declaring that war "must not be a means of conflict resolution," armed force must be decisively rejected "as a means of politics" and that "German foreign and security policy, conscious of its historical responsibility," must work for peace by all means, there follows the familiar government propaganda about the war in Ukraine.

The Russian leadership, it states, has "brought death, suffering

and destruction upon the civilian population." Every day, "serious crimes against universal human rights" are committed. IG Metall supports "all demands on the Russian government to immediately cease all hostilities." Russian troops must be withdrawn from Ukraine immediately, it demands.

IG Metall half admits that NATO provoked the Russian attack when it states, "The security policy behaviour of the Western community of states may have been perceived by Russia's leadership as a provocation." Yet it goes on to deny the obvious. Although NATO is providing logistical support for the war and funding it to the tune of triple-digit billions, the union claims, "There is no proxy war being fought by the West in Ukraine."

The document then goes on to endorse NATO's war aims. It says Ukraine's "state sovereignty" must be restored and backed by "credible and effective security guarantees." It explicitly defends "arms exports or arms deliveries to crisis regions and warring states" if they serve to ensure that "democratic states exercise their right to self-defense against an armed attack."

IG Metall supports the rearmament of the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) and calls for a debate on a European security architecture. It writes: "A not inconsiderable role in these debates is played by security and defense policy integration for European sovereignty." This concerns "above all armaments cooperation" and the "necessary equipping of the Bundeswehr" so that it can "fulfill its constitutional core mission of national and alliance defense."

The union is thus not only backing the brutal proxy war in Ukraine, which has already cost hundreds of thousands of lives and threatens to lead to nuclear war, but is also supporting the militarization of the entire society. While the German budget for the health care and education systems are being slashed, at least €80.5 billion are to flow into the Bundeswehr next year. In addition to this come the expenditures for the promised arms deliveries to Ukraine, which amounted to €17.1 billion in the first 18 months of the war alone, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

These horrendous sums are being squeezed out of workers. IG Metall, services union Verdi and all other unions play a central role in putting this brutal policy into practice. In recent months, they have imposed massive real wage cuts on their workers.

The so-called Concerted Action was formed immediately after the start of the war in Ukraine a year and a half ago to serve this purpose. Chancellor Scholz delivered his war speech in the

Bundestag (German Parliament) and announced a “special fund” of €100 billion to rearm the Bundeswehr. Shortly thereafter, the top officials of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and all the associated trade unions gathered together with the officials of the employers’ associations in the Chancellor’s Office and agreed to a close collaboration.

The talks served to “make working people pay for the horrendous costs of military rearmament and the consequences of the NATO offensive and the economic war against Russia, while preventing any resistance to it,” as we commented on the WSWS. The result was the wretched wage settlements that imposed horrendous real wage cuts on the workers.

Since then, the pact between unions, employers’ associations and the federal government has been steadily expanded. It was central to the debates at the trade union congress.

Economics Minister Habeck received sustained applause from delegates for his call for a subsidized electricity price for industry. The industrial electricity price is to be capped by the state at six cents per kilowatt hour, while new private customers pay five times that amount. This “transitional electricity price” (Brückenstrompreis) is intended to make cheap electricity available to energy-intensive sectors such as the steel and chemical industries, which would result in further billions in subsidies for large corporations and corresponding cuts in the social sector.

Habeck thanked IG Metall for its support. The union organized a so-called steel action day two days before its congress, focusing on the German state of Saarland. Protesting steelworkers served as a backdrop for a joint rally by IG Metall, Stahl-Holding Saar and the state government, which issued identical appeals to the federal government calling for the introduction of the transitional electricity price and further subsidies for energy-intensive corporations.

After the day of action initiated by IG Metall, the German government announced a meeting of the coalition committee on the same day to discuss further tax subsidies for large, energy-dependent corporations.

The transformation of the trade unions into lobby organizations for corporations and partners of industry and government could hardly be more plain to see.

The congress of IG Metall, which likes to call itself the largest trade union in the “free world,” also elected a new leadership. For the first time in its 132-year history, a woman was elected First Chairwoman. But the election of Christiane Benner is neither a turning point nor a new beginning, as the media claim. She will continue the union’s long-standing transformation into a tool of the corporations and the government.

A sociologist by training, she travelled to the US as a young woman and lived there for several years to study Gender Studies, which was not offered at German universities at the time. “Even back then, I was interested in the gender-specific reasons for inequality,” she told the German weekly *Der Spiegel* this spring. This orientation toward gender and the associated rejection of class struggle will further accelerate the union’s right-wing development.

Benner is a member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and works closely with DGB chairwoman Yasmin Fahimi,

who was formerly the SPD’s general secretary. But she is also close to the Green Party and Foreign Secretary Annalena Baerbock, who calls her own aggressive support for war and military buildup “feminist foreign policy.”

At the union conference, Benner did not speak of a “feminist trade union policy,” but she did emphasize that she saw her main task as expanding the union’s “co-determination” in the workplace and society.

What that means is clear. IG Metall is to be even more deeply integrated into the management of corporations and to work even more intensively with the government to suppress the class struggle and to maintain peace and order in the factories.

A few years ago, figures came to light about the close involvement of the union with management. According to these figures, about 1,700 IG Metall representatives sit on the supervisory boards of companies, where they are paid princely salaries. Today there are probably even more. Through these supervisory boards, hundreds of millions of euro flow into the union’s own Hans Böckler Foundation every year.

IG Metall’s most important asset, however, is the approximately 50,000 works councils and 80,000 shop stewards in the factories. This powerful apparatus functions like a company police force. It is used to control and suppress the workers. Wage cuts and job reductions are often worked out directly in union headquarters and then enforced against the will of the workforce.

This is especially true in defence corporations such as Airbus, Rheinmetall, KMW (Kraus-Maffei Wegmann) and Diehl, where arms production is currently being ramped up with the help of IG Metall.

An accounting of the IG Metall trade union congress makes clear the importance and urgency of building independent rank-and-file committees in order to break through the straitjacket of the trade union apparatus and to link the struggle against factory closures, wage cuts and social cuts with the struggle against war and militarist rearmament.



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