

The farmers' protests in Germany: A social uprising against the coalition government

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Over the course of last week, tens of thousands of farmers protested against the German government's austerity policy, blocking motorways, access roads and city centres with their tractors. Some of the tractor convoys were up to 10 kilometres long. The farmers have planned another major demonstration in Berlin this Monday.

The farmers' protests are part of a social uprising against the government (a coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party) embracing broad sections of the working class, as well as layers of the middle class. In the same week as the farmers' protests, train drivers shut down the country's rail network (Deutsche Bahn) for three days, with many craft workers joining the farmers' demonstrations. Around 70 percent of the population have expressed support for the protesters, according to polls.

Last year, millions of public sector and postal workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action. This was then sabotaged by their trade unions, which then fobbed them off with wage settlements far below the rate of inflation. At the same time, a huge wave of job losses is unfolding in the auto and supplier industry, endorsed and co-organised by the country's main engineering union, IG Metall.

Representatives of the government and related media outlets alternately tried to portray the farmers' protests as a far-right conspiracy or as protests by privileged layers greedy for subsidies.

Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Green Party), who was prevented from leaving a ferry by outraged farmers after a holiday on a North Sea island, ranted in a video produced by his ministry: "There are calls circulating involving fantasies of a coup. Extremist groups are forming, nationalist symbols are being openly displayed." The German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) claimed that "right-wing extremists and other enemies of democracy are trying to infiltrate the protests."

The weekly *Der Spiegel* compared the farmers' protest to the storming of the US Capitol by Trump supporters and warned of "far-right coup fantasies." The Green Party-affiliated newspaper *taz* declared: "The protests are inappropriate and are encouraging right-wing extremists." And the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* commented under the headline "Pampered farmers": "German farmers can hardly rescue themselves from subsidies. But when they have to give up one of their privileges, tractors roll onto the motorways. This is not a reasonable protest, but rather an impertinence."

In fact these are despicable slanders. Isolated attempts by right-wing extremists to attach themselves to the protests—such as a separate "farmers" demonstration by the Free Saxons in Dresden—have come to nothing. Right-wing extremists were unwelcomed at most of the farmers' rallies. Attempts at ingratiation into the protests by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which had called for "more competition" and "fewer subsidies" for agriculture in its 2016 programme, also had little effect. And as far as the economic situation of farmers is concerned, many are up to their necks in water.

The protests were triggered by the German government's decision to

cancel tax concessions for agricultural diesel and tax exemption for agricultural vehicles. These two measures were intended to save, respectively, €450 million and €485 million a year, i.e., just under a billion euros. Adjusted to the over 250,000 farms that exist in Germany, this amounts to the considerable sum of €4,000 per farm on average, directly reduced from farmers' incomes.

The tax increase, however, was merely the straw that broke the camel's back. That is why the protests did not stop when the government made a partial retreat last Thursday, cancelling the abolition of the vehicle tax exemption and spreading the abolition of tax relief for agricultural diesel over three years.

Agriculture in crisis

For decades, there has been brutal cutthroat competition in agriculture, forcing thousands of farms to cease production every year—an extremely painful and nerve-wracking process. Fifty years ago there were still over 900,000 farms in Germany, today there are just 250,000.

In order to remain viable, farms must constantly expand by leasing new land, investing in new machinery and increasing their specialisation. They not only have to contend with rising rental prices—between 2010 and 2020, the rent per hectare of farmland rose from €230 to €375—and wildly fluctuating prices for their products, which are dictated by speculation on international commodity exchanges or by market-dominating retailers such as Aldi and Lidl, but also with ever new regulations from the European Union and the German government. Although some of these measures—such as setting aside certain areas for environmental reasons—are linked to payments ("subsidies"), this makes farmers even more dependent on the whims of politicians.

All of this makes long-term planning extremely difficult. However, in view of the high degree of mechanisation in agriculture, farmers are urgently dependent on such planning. At €794,300 capital per employee (not including land), agriculture is one of the most capital-intensive sectors of all. In manufacturing (industry) this figure is just €411,000, in trade €193,300, and in construction €59,500. Such high investments in machinery, stables and other facilities can only pay off if they are planned over decades.

In 2020, the German agricultural sector employed 937,000 people. Just under half, 436,000, were family workers in sole proprietorships; 229,000 were permanent employees and 271,000 were seasonal workers. Incomes were relatively low and very unevenly distributed.

The figure of €115,000 profit per farm, which is often cited as proof of the "wealth" of farmers, actually proves nothing of the sort. Unlike company profits, where the salaries of employees and board members have already been deducted, the profits must be used to cover the living

expenses of the farm owner and family members who work on the farm.

The actual per capita income (profit plus personnel expenses per worker) amounted to €43,500 in the financial year 2021/22. This represented a huge leap of almost a third compared to the previous year, and resulted from the increase in food prices in the wake of the war in Ukraine. Food prices since have fallen significantly.

Previously, farmers' incomes had stagnated for 10 years. In 2020/21, the average was €32,900, €1,700 below the level of 2012/13, which corresponds to an average gross monthly wage of €2,740. This is well below the average salary of €4,100, and involves for many farmers working hours of between 60 and 70 hours per week and hardly any holidays.

In addition, incomes vary greatly depending on the type of farm, region and form of employment, meaning that many farmers and employees earn significantly less.

There are 38,000 farms in Germany with an area of more than 100 hectares, which together farm 62 percent of the agricultural land. These are often agricultural enterprises. Their returns are relatively high, but this does not mean they also pay their employees well. In eastern Germany, where many of these agricultural enterprises are located, a third are owned by non-local investors.

In contrast, 86 percent of all farms cultivate less than 100 hectares of land. These range from intensive livestock farming to traditional family farms and organic farms to part-time farms. Eighty percent of all farms are family-owned—in some cases for generations. According to a survey by the Federal Statistical Office, 42 percent stated that in addition to farming, they were involved in other sources of income such as forestry, wood processing and the production of renewable energy.

A number of farms have tried to secure their existence by converting to organic farming. There are now 37,000 organic farms in Germany. Prices are more stable here, but incomes are also particularly low due to high labour intensity. The government's increase in the price of diesel is hitting these farms particularly hard, due to their heavy reliance on machinery in order to compensate for their limited use of pesticides.

Lessons from history

The austerity measures of the coalition government have now managed to unite the different groups and sections of farmers. Unlike in October 2019, when smaller farmers' associations organised tractor protests against the government's agricultural policy, this time the German Farmers' Association, which traditionally represents the interests of large landowners and agricultural businesses, has taken the lead. It is doing everything in its power to keep the movement under control and prevent it from becoming part of a broader revolt against the government and the state.

In fact, just such a movement is developing. The policies of the coalition government, which is spending hundreds of billions on war and rearmament, protecting the profits of the rich while cutting social spending, wages and public investment, are driving ever broader sections of the population onto the barricades. Similar developments are taking place in every capitalist country.

Even somewhat more far-sighted bourgeois commentators see it that way. The business daily *Handelsblatt* writes:

Around 70 percent of the population sympathise with the farmers' protests. The farmers have been joined on the streets by small and medium-sized businesses, tradespeople and ordinary

industrial workers. They are all united by a feeling of helplessness, which has long since turned into anger at the situation in the country. It is no longer just about cutting subsidies.

The pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy emergency have left citizens unable to cope. Now there is also a fundamental mistrust of the state.

The coalition in Berlin will stop at nothing to suppress this movement and defend the bankrupt capitalist social system against any opposition. This is underlined by the brutality with which it is fuelling the punitive war against Russia in Ukraine, supporting the genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and adopting the refugee policy of the AfD. Despite some tactical differences, the government essentially agrees with the opposition parties, the conservative CDU and CSU, the Left Party and the AfD.

The solution to the social crisis depends on liberating the working class from the paralysing control of the trade union apparatuses and mobilising it for a socialist policy that breaks the power of the banks and corporations over society. The farmers' protests are a symptom of the social crisis, but as a petty-bourgeois layer they are incapable of developing their own independent political line.

What Leon Trotsky, the outstanding Marxist of the 20th century, wrote, based on decades of experience with the petty bourgeoisie, remains true today:

... under the conditions of capitalist disintegration and the impasse in the economic situation, the petty bourgeoisie strives, seeks, and attempts to tear itself loose from the fetters of the old masters and rulers of society. It is quite capable of linking its fate with that of the proletariat. For that, only one thing is needed: the petty bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road. The proletariat can inspire this faith only by its strength, by the firmness of its actions, by a skillful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy.

If, on the other hand, the revolutionary party, such as the German Communist Party dominated by Stalin at the time, proves incapable of rallying the working class, "then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery." It turns to the fascists.

Today, the Socialist Equality Party (*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*—SGP) is the only party fighting to develop the growing opposition to social inequality, oppression and war into a powerful movement of the working class against capitalism. It is taking part in this year's European elections in close cooperation with its international sister parties to campaign for a United Socialist States of Europe—a Europe in which social needs and not the profit interests of the rich determine the economy and politics.

On this basis, it will also be possible to reconcile the social interests of farmers with the necessity to supply healthy food to the population and at the same time protecting the environment.



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