

# Germany's trade union apparatus closes ranks with the government

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On Monday, at the four-day congress of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), Yasmin Fahimi was reelected chairwoman for another four years with more than 96 percent of the vote. Such a result recalls the elections once held by the Stalinist state parties of the GDR (East Germany) and Eastern Europe before their collapse in 1991.

How has Fahimi earned this success? During her first term in office, membership in the eight unions that make up the DGB fell by 250,000, to 5.4 million. Thirty-five years ago, after German reunification, it stood at 11.8 million. Real wages in 2025 were below their 2019 level. In industry, more than 10,000 jobs have been destroyed on average every month over the past two years. In the auto industry alone, more than 50,000 jobs were eliminated last year, and the trend is accelerating.

But none of this impacts the well-paid functionaries who gathered in Berlin from Sunday to Wednesday. They sit on a thick financial cushion that they have accumulated from membership dues, which amount to more than half a billion euros annually.

These funds have long since ceased to be used to support labour struggles. Instead, they finance the trade union apparatus, which plays a key role in suppressing strikes and enforcing job cuts. IG Metall, for example, has agreed to the destruction of 50,000 jobs at Volkswagen alone.

Confronted with workers' growing anger and the outrage of their own members, the union bureaucracy is closing ranks. This is the significance of Fahimi's record election result.

Fahimi has a direct line to the government, with which she works closely. In 2014 and 2015, she served as general secretary of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which currently controls three key ministries,

labor, finance and defense, in the government of Friedrich Merz of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Chancellor Merz appeared in person at the congress early on Tuesday. He began his speech by praising the DGB, co-determination and the "social partnership." "Cooperation between the state and social partners has proven its worth in our country time and again," he emphasised. He explicitly committed himself to the "unified trade union," that is, to the DGB unions' monopoly in workplaces and public administrations, and their refusal to allow competing or oppositional organizations to emerge. For this, he received multiple rounds of applause.

Merz then committed the delegates to massive cuts in social spending and called on them to cooperate. We will all have to make sacrifices, the social systems can no longer function as they have up to now, we must set priorities and accept changes; this was the tenor of his speech.

"We cannot simply carry on as we have for the last 20 years. We must be prepared to make changes in order to preserve what is important to us in our country," Merz said. He added that it was a matter of jointly improving conditions for Germany as a production location. "Geopolitical, geoeconomic and social security" could "only exist with economic strength."

Merz went into detail about the social attacks his government has already decided on or is still planning: The abolition of Bürgergeld, Germany's basic welfare benefit; a €16 billion reduction in statutory health insurance spending next year; and cuts to long-term care insurance.

"The hardest nut to crack will be pension insurance," Merz said. "It quite simply exceeds the strength of two

contributors, who are supposed to finance the pension of one person in the future. Therefore, we will and must strengthen the two capital-funded pillars of the pension insurance system.” This, he claimed, was not malice on the part of the federal government, but a matter of demographics and mathematics.

Merz thus repeated his earlier statement that the statutory pension will in future serve only as “basic security” and will no longer be sufficient to maintain retirees’ standard of living. When he went on to claim that the “reforms” were a great opportunity and served to preserve the welfare state, there were isolated boos. These were purely theatrical. The DGB stands fully behind the government’s austerity plans, but cannot welcome them openly without losing its last shred of credibility.

The close collaboration between the DGB and the Merz government was shown by the warm reception the congress gave to Bärbel Bas, who, as labor minister, is responsible for the social cuts. The SPD co-chair was introduced as a trade union member. “Dear Bärbel” herself referred to her background in a working-class family in Duisburg that knew what hard work meant. She assured the delegates, “I will fight against the dismantling of workers’ rights.”

Bas described the welfare state as an “anchor of stability for this country.” “Whoever weakens the welfare state ultimately also weakens our economy, because social security creates trust, purchasing power, but above all cohesion,” she declared.

But in terms of content, Bas remained hard as nails, defending the social cuts and the abolition of the eight-hour day, which the government intends to initiate this month. The maximum daily working time of eight hours, or 10 hours in exceptional cases, is to be replaced by a weekly upper limit that allows significantly longer working hours.

In order not to appear completely passive, the DGB leadership had declared the defence of the eight-hour day its core concern. Before Bas’s appearance, Fahimi strongly urged her to stick with the existing regulation. But Bas rebuffed her, saying the change was already set out in the coalition agreement between the SPD and CDU/CSU and could no longer be altered. This did not prevent the congress from applauding her warmly.

Neither Merz nor Bas mentioned the government’s central project: The massive increase in military

spending and the buildup of the Bundeswehr into the strongest army in Europe. The war against Russia in Ukraine, which Germany supports with sums running into the tens of billions, as well as the Israeli genocide in Gaza, were also only marginal issues at the congress.

The DGB leadership stands fully behind the government’s rearmament and war plans, which the vast majority of working people reject. But Merz apparently wanted to spare the DGB the embarrassment of having to openly declare its support for his policy of rearmament and war, and therefore avoided mentioning them.

The DGB congress has once again shown that the role of the corporatist trade union apparatuses is to stand in the camp of the corporations and the government, and sabotage any serious struggle to defend wages, jobs, and social and democratic rights. They cannot be reformed. What is necessary is the building of rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties, to fight exploitation, war and capitalism, and unite the working class internationally.



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