

Germany's "Agenda 2010"

10,000 demonstrate in Berlin against attack on social conditions

By Verena Nees
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"Agenda 2010 is a declaration of war by the SPD (Social Democratic Party) government against the socially disadvantaged." This comment by a participant at the trade union rally in Berlin on May 17 summed up the predominant mood. Around 10,000 trade unionists and members of unemployed organisations responded to the call made by the service industries union Ver.di to protest against the attacks being carried out by the German government on the welfare state.

Widespread outrage at the most savage programme of cuts to be introduced by a government in the history of the postwar republic was reflected in the home-made banners bearing such slogans as: "Stop Schröder's plundering of the welfare state", "Schröder, Gerster, Clement (all leading SPD politicians)—create nothing but poverty!", "You no longer have a choice—the only alternative is social resistance," "Solidarity instead of competition—health is not a commodity." Many placards called upon the government to begin its programme of cuts with the rich rather than the poor.

Against a background of booing and whistling directed at the government's measures, Ver.di chairman Frank Bsirske criticised the individual proposals contained in "Agenda 2010." Bsirske's speech was also interrupted by calls of "you also played their game!"

"We are being sold outright destruction of the welfare state under the guise of reforms," he stated. The massive cuts in welfare include shortening the period of payments for the unemployed and the consolidation of different forms of payments, drastic cuts to health insurance and the transfer of costs onto the shoulders of employees, together with the plan for fees for visits to the doctor and the so-called "personal contribution" for insurance payments. They recall in a fatal manner "the period of Helmut Kohl," the union official said, adding that this was not why the SPD was voted into office.

He emphasised that the programme being put forward by the SPD and Greens represented a massive redistribution of wealth in favour of profits for big business. "Via the profound tax reform of Hans Eichel (SPD finance minister) corporate taxes have plummeted from 23,5 billion euros in 2000 to absolutely nothing in 2001. Postmen, nurses and bus drivers today pay more tax than Daimler-Chrysler on its profits. The 5,7 billion euros in cuts now being proposed by the government could be recouped just with the 6 billion lost by reductions to the taxation of top level earnings.

At the end of his speech, however, Bsirske made clear that the trade unions have nothing to offer in the way of an alternative. The crowd became increasingly quiet when he stated that there could be no doubt about the seriousness of the economic situation and declared that the trade unions were not opponents of reform. "It is not a question of if, but rather what sort of changes and where they will lead," he said. "There can be no question about it, the alternative we are putting forward cannot be achieved for free." Applause began again when he proposed the reintroduction of wealth tax and taxation of corporate earnings together with a further mobilisation against the planned cuts.

Initially Ver.di, along with other DGB (German Trade Union Federation) unions, had collaborated on the proposals for cuts and welcomed such measures as the consolidation of welfare payments proposed last year by the Hartz commission set up by the current government. Only after some hesitation did Ver.di finally decide to organise a protest. It was responding to palpable anger in the ranks and a growing wave of resignations from the union.

The union however, sought to keep Saturday's protest small and only mobilised part of its membership—the insurance sector, labour administration, higher education institutions and unemployed initiatives. There was no sign of the highly organised ranks of hospital, transport and refuse collection workers who have turned out en masse on previous ÖTV demonstrations. A few such workers came to Saturday's demonstration—but on their own initiative.

Even so, the limited action was fiercely denounced by employer organisations, the government and media. Some newspapers responded by ignoring the protest. In the run up to the demonstration Ver.di chairman Frank Bsirske and the IG-Metall chairman Klaus Zwickel were denounced as "opponents of reform" and "old-time hardliners." Germany's second biggest trade union IG Metall, refused, together with Ver.di, to take part in talks with the government over "Agenda 2010," and announced protest actions.

On the same day as the Berlin rally Bsirske and Zwickel were also attacked by other trade union leaders. Three smaller trade unions representing the food and chemical industries, together with railway employees, made a joint statement calling on the trade union movement to "approach" the government and "take part" in the "process of reforms" and the "further development of

the market economy.”

The chairman of the umbrella organisation of German trade unions (DGB), Michael Sommer, sought to play down the conflict and sent his deputy, Ursula Engelen-Kefer, as a speaker at the Berlin demonstration. Sommer told the press he is ready to attend talks with the chancellor and other government representatives, but at the same time was following a sort of “double strategy” including the use of pressure.

In interviews with the WSWS, many participants at the rally expressed their disillusionment with the trade unions.

Karin Dalhus, 52 years old, from the Berlin suburb of Marzahn, said: “The trade unions kept quiet for a long time and argued that the main thing was to stop (the right-wing politician-CSU Christian Social Union) Stoiber. They agreed to the government’s previous package of cuts, the Hartz plan, and so opened the way for the cuts which are currently being proposed. Now, when the situation is so drastic, they have organised a half-hearted protest.” Stoiber was not elected, but the SPD government is now proposing a policy which “not only overshadows everything planned by the conservative government of Helmut Kohl up to 1998, but also corresponds to the demands of today’s CDU-CSU-opposition led by Stoiber,” she said. “The government is pursuing a policy of radical dismantlement of the welfare state, which hits the employed and unemployed in equal measure.”

As a direct victim of the policies of the Kohl government, Karin Dalhus speaks from experience. In the former GDR (the German Democratic Republic that ruled East Germany) she worked as a teacher, but was sacked in 1991 for being a member of a teachers’ organisation in the GDR. Since then she has had a variety of jobs and is now unemployed for the fifth time. She summed up her reaction to current SPD policies as follows: “The trade unions and the working class must break completely from the course being pursued by the SPD and establish their independence from all of the established parties.”

Sabine Junker, who is also 52 years old, is a nurse from the west Berlin suburb of Neukölln. She came to the demo on her own initiative and said there had been no arrangements for a delegation to attend from her hospital. The staff of the hospital in Neukölln, which has been recently subjected to fifty percent privatisation and now belongs to the Vivantes Group, was in the past one of the most militant groups of trade unionists in the public sector union, ÖTV, which recently merged into the umbrella Ver.di union.

Sabine Junker said what she thought of “Agenda 2010”: “The term ‘social’ is no longer valid in connection to the SPD. It demands cutbacks only from ordinary people and not from the rich who can afford it.” Sabine and her family are directly affected by the policies of the SPD-PDS government in Berlin, which has quit the employers organisation in order to impose massive cuts in the wages and benefits of city public employees. Her husband works as a civil servant for the city and has had his work week extended to 42 hours. Bonus payments for Christmas and holidays are due to be eliminated. Her own wages as a nurse working shifts amounts to 670 euros take-home pay and will not be increased before 2006. At the same time, the costs for educating her two children are rising continually because of cuts aimed at the schools and higher education.

“We can only afford to go on holiday every other year,” Sabine Junker said. The senate is planning to do away with protection against redundancy in 2006, and there are plans to rid the hospital in Neukölln of a further 700 beds. “There are already patients on the floor,” she said. Although she has not really bothered herself with politics up to now, she thinks it is necessary to establish a new party for working people, and that the current government “has to be replaced by a better, more humane government.”

Wolfram Otto is an executive member of the national working group on social initiatives and attended the demonstration with a group from the city of Kiel. They came with a banner protesting against “low-wage jobs and forced labour.”

“Agenda 2010 is a declaration of war by the SPD government against the socially disadvantaged,” Otto said. “The SPD is undertaking measures which the conservatives did not dare to do. It has become dependent on big capital and has organised tax cuts for the employers at the cost of the poorest. I am sceptical as to whether the trade unions have an answer.

“The argument that one has to save is a pseudo argument,” Wolfram Otto continued. The savings arising from the new planned cuts are relatively small - 1 billion euros. The real pain is felt by those who have 1,000 less a year to live on and are thrown into poverty. “In reality it is all about putting pressure on people to accept low-wage jobs,” he said.

Otto said that what is taking place in Germany had already taken place in America—the transformation of unemployed into so-called “working poor.” Over the past period there had been a noticeable increase in the numbers coming into the Kiel offices for the unemployed who can no longer cope because their wages are too low.

An employee of a health insurance company from Nürnberg who is an active SPD and Ver.di member and regularly reads the WSWS reported that his colleagues will be doubly hit by government plans to attack the health insurance system—first by higher contributions to the insurance schemes and second by redundancies arising from inevitable cuts in staff. “The health insurance companies are being forced into an increasingly vicious competition for members and the victims will be the sick and vulnerable themselves,” he said. “The fit and healthy are offered the best terms—the elderly, sick and invalid will be forced to pay higher and higher contributions to the point where many can no longer afford to make payments and then no longer qualify for treatment and services. The sort of Keynesian consensus politics which dominated in Germany in the post-war period are exhausted and we now confront a savage struggle for the re-division of resources and income.”

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