100,000 demonstrate in Berlin against Schröder’s Agenda 2010

By our reporters
4 November 2003

An estimated 100,000 marched Saturday in Berlin against the German government’s programme for drastic cuts in the welfare state known as “Agenda 2010.” Those who called the demonstration, including welfare organisations and groups representing the unemployed and pensioners, together with a number of left radical groups, expressed their surprise at the size of the protest. Over the previous week, the demonstration had come under fire from government representatives and had been largely boycotted by the trade unions. In advance of the rally, the organisers were prepared to consider any attendance in excess of 10,000 to be a success.

In the event, 300 buses came from across Germany, bringing people to the biggest demonstration in Berlin since the massive anti-war mobilisation in the spring of this year. Large numbers of senior citizens marched alongside tens of thousands of young people and entire families to express their anger and disgust at government plans for the dismantling of social provisions and guarantees that had their origins in the “carrot-and-stick” policies of German chancellor Bismarck 130 years ago.

The huge, colourful and militant march wound its way through the centre of Berlin, bringing traffic to a standstill for several hours. Placards on the demonstration read “Agenda 2010—neo-liberal and anti-welfare,” “Young people must fight for their future, For training, education and jobs,” and, in a play on words based on the initials of the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD), “They Plunder Germany.” Other banners and chants on the demonstration called for a general strike and the resignation of the government.

Although some flags of the world’s biggest trade union, the service workers’ union Ver.di, were prominent at the head of the march, many demonstrators complained bitterly of the role played by the unions in undermining participation for the demonstration. Many of those taking part in Saturday’s protest recalled the militant promises made by the chairman of Ver.di, Frank Bsirske, at an anti-Agenda 2010 demonstration last May, where he promised further and bigger protests against the government’s proposals.

In fact, since May, Ver.di, in line with the rest of the German trade union movement, has systematically wound down its opposition to the government. Only last week, Bsirske announced that he planned to meet Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for personal discussions on welfare cuts.

Germany’s second biggest trade union, the engineering union IG-Metall, effectively boycotted the protest Saturday, doing virtually nothing to mobilise its members in the factories. Michael Sommer, the chairman of the umbrella organisation of the German trade unions, the DGB, actually met last week with the conservative opposition party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), for joint talks on the implementation of cuts to the German health system.

In addition to the political sabotage by the leadership of the trade unions, Saturday’s protest came under fire from government representatives. A few days before the demonstration, a co-chairman of the Green Party, Angelika Beer, attacked those who planned to take part as “politically inept.” Leading members of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) could be seen on the demonstration, but the party as a whole kept a low profile. The PDS has been thoroughly discredited in recent months by its direct participation in draconian cuts to social services and education in the German capital.

The main speaker at the rally that followed the march was the social scientist and researcher Rainer Roth, from the University of Frankfurt. He drew attention to the enormous re-division of wealth that has occurred within the past few years under the SPD-Green Party coalition government.

Since 2001, he reported, German big business has benefited by the sum of 50 billion euros from the government’s abolition of the corporate tax. Roth outlined some of the dramatic social consequences of the unprecedented assault on German welfare provisions, and called for international solidarity to combat the flight of capital abroad. At the same time, he sought to revive confidence in the trade unions by declaring that the policies of the French and Italian unions represented a positive alternative to the corporatism of the German DGB.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) and World Socialist Web Site set up information tables at the beginning of the march and the site of the final rally. In addition, a team of PSG and WSWS supporters distributed a leaflet headlined “A Political Answer to Social Cuts and War” and engaged in discussion with many participants.

The leaflet drew a balance of the recent period, explaining the connection between the anti-social policies of the Schröder government and its de facto support for the war in Iraq, and emphasising the need for a new international workers’ party.

Christian, a young student who had travelled to the demonstration with a delegation from Aachen, explained why he
was taking part and how the local trade unions had sought to undermine support for the protest.

“I am alarmed and appalled by the government’s Agenda 2010. It represents a fundamental onslaught on the social fabric and welfare state that have guaranteed social harmony in this country for an entire epoch. I think it is correct to raise the connection, as you do in your leaflet, between the domestic and foreign policy of the German government.

“In both regards, the common denominator is the interests of German big business and industry. This was already clear with the war against Iraq. German industry has its own long-standing trade links in Iraq, and the Schröder government only issued its initial criticism of US policy in the region out of concern for its own interests. In fact, the German government collaborated in the US-led war. Now it is demonstrating the same determination and loyalty to big business in its campaign against working people in Germany, and is being assisted by the unions...

“Our delegation was organised by a local group protesting against the dismantling of the welfare state. The organisation had contacted the trade unions in Aachen, which declared they would not be organising their own transport to the demo. It became clear that they had not lifted a finger to mobilise or inform their members in the city of the demonstration. In the event, a handful of Ver.di members made the trip to Berlin with us, but the union insisted it would only pay the travel costs of its own members and not subsidise the bus we had organised. Because of the low turnout for our coach, we will have to pay more for the trip.”

Ishild, who is 65 and lives in Berlin, told the WSWS that this was her first day as a pensioner. “I receive just 365 euros per month,” she said, “because, like many women, I married and raised my children. As a result, I worked for just 12 years in my profession as a gardener.

“The attacks on pensioners by the Schröder government will have catastrophic consequences. Even for someone with a pension of 900 euros—how can he or she be expected to pay rent, the cost of food and medical payments? Meanwhile, the politicians are putting up their own pay, and after just a few years in the job receive a huge pension for which they have made no contribution.”

Ishild was especially angry over the stance of the Greens, which has faithfully supported the SPD in its assault on the German welfare state. “If the SPD and Greens need money, then why do they not turn to those who have it—the wealthy and big business—instead of exploiting the poor and the needy? They have turned on its head everything they promised before being elected. When one thinks that the Greens originally posed as a left alternative to the SPD, it is clear that their entire perspective has come unstuck.”

Ishild was also disappointed by the way in which both the SPD and the Greens capitulated and abandoned their original opposition to the Iraq war. “It is an unjust war. According to international law, the US and its allies should be forced to pay reparations to the Iraqis, just as Germany paid reparations after the Second World War.”

Many of those taking part were active members of trade unions who complained that the leadership of their unions refused to give any support to the demonstration. A worker from the Philips factory at Norderstedt near Hamburg travelled to Berlin with his son. He had sent an e-mail to his local IG Metall chairman to find out the details of transport to Berlin, but his inquiry was simply ignored. Eventually, he was able to organise transport with the help of some other rank-and-file trade unionists.

“Every day,” he said, “there are announcements of new, even more far-reaching attacks on the welfare state. It seems that Schröder is always poised on some balcony, threatening to jump if everybody does not accept his plans. If it were left to me, I would call out: ‘Do it! Jump!’”

Dieter, who is 59, used to be the chairman of the trade union committee at an engineering works in Solingen. He took early retirement last year because of ill health. He told the WSWS: “When I rang the trade union headquarters in Solingen to ask about buses being put on by IG Metall or Ver.di, I met with one rejection after another. Eventually, I was able to travel with a bus organised by supporters of the attac movement. I regard the stance of the union leadership to be thoroughly irresponsible. We pay their wages, but what are they doing for us?”

An unemployed forester and attac supporter who came in the same bus carried a placard proclaiming: “The New World According to Clement—Forced Labour.” He explained that the aim of Agenda 2010 was not, as Labour Minister Wolfgang Clement (SPD) claimed, the creation of new jobs, but rather “to establish control over the millions of unemployed by forcing them to undertake forms of forced labour.” He added: “The SPD is seeking to reintroduce conditions which existed in the 19th century. Agenda 2010 is only a beginning, a pilot project in this direction.”

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