

German unions support the government's war policies

By Ulrich Rippert
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The German Trade Union Federation (DGB) unreservedly supports the foreign policy of the grand coalition government and its return to great power politics and militarism. This is clear from an article by the new DGB chairman, Reiner Hoffmann, published on a website of the foreign ministry.

In May, foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD, Social Democratic Party) opened the website “Review 2014—thinking further in foreign policy”, to promote the new foreign policy orientation announced at the beginning of the year.

Steinmeier, along with Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen and President Joachim Gauck, announced that the previous policy of military reticence was at an end. In the future, Germany would once again intervene in the world's crisis regions “also militarily”, with more independence and more self-confidence.

At the meeting to launch the new website, Steinmeier repeated that Germany was “too big and too important” to continue “commenting on world politics only from the sidelines”.

Until now it has been mainly foreign “experts”, invited and paid by the foreign ministry, who have promoted “greater German foreign policy responsibility” on the new website. This culminated in a contribution by a professor from Singapore, whose article was headlined: “Germany's destiny—to lead Europe in order to lead the world”.

Now the DGB has officially supported this campaign. Completely in step with Steinmeier, with whom he has collaborated for years in various leading SPD bodies, Hoffmann writes: “In many parts of the world where acute crises arise, German foreign policy is confronted time and again with the need for short-term intervention. We therefore need a forward-looking foreign policy, which can recognise the potential for

crisis early enough and make a preventive intervention.”

“Forward-looking foreign policy” and “preventive intervention” are code words for aggressively pursuing imperialist interests, as the German government is doing currently in Ukraine, where it is collaborating with oligarchs and fascists in order to bring the country under the influence of the European Union and NATO.

Hoffmann does not need to specifically mention that he too supports military intervention in pursuit of imperialist goals. That is clear from the context of the official discussion. Consequently he makes no criticism about the current intensive campaign to beef up Germany's military capacity and for military interventions.

Instead, the union bureaucrat praises the effectiveness of the civil service apparatus in the foreign ministry, which, “with the political foundations, the German embassies, but also the organisations of civil society”, has “numerous and good sources of information” at its disposal.

It goes without saying that Hoffmann and the unions belong to the “organisations of civil society”, with their European and international umbrella organisations, along with the union-led works councils in the transnational corporations providing the foreign ministry with an excellent network of international relations.

Hoffmann praises the European Union and the Maastricht Treaty, which serve the German government as an instrument for imposing massive attacks on workers' social achievements in Greece and throughout Europe. “We need a foreign policy that concentrates on multi-lateralism and which strongly supports the EU's common foreign and security policy introduced in the 1993 Maastricht Treaty”, he writes.

Hoffmann embeds his support for an imperialist foreign policy and the EU with rhetoric about social justice, maintaining international standards, the dismantling of social and economic inequality and the strengthening of social partnership. “The social dialogue between employers and employees contributes decisively to the dismantling of social and economic inequality, and must therefore be extended internationally”, he writes, and emphasizes that “free trade unions” are indispensable to that end.

He consciously utilises the term “free trade unions”. Ever since the Cold War, it has connoted anti-communist “unions” that collaborate closely with the CIA and other imperialist secret services and support dictatorial regimes.

Hoffmann declares that the universal access to basic social safeguards and trade union freedom are “human rights”. This term too should be seen in relation to the current war propaganda.

Almost all the imperialist wars of the last years—in Libya, Syria and Mali—were conducted in the name of “human rights”. The UN has even developed its own doctrine to this end, the “Responsibility to Protect”. Steinmeier also demands that Germany should no longer leave the preservation of human rights to others, but must be prepared to make a contribution to the defence of human rights everywhere in the World—also militarily.

The new DGB chief, who at almost 60 is an experienced union apparatchik, embellishes the humanitarian war propaganda of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party with social phrases and offers the DGB’s services as a partner to the foreign ministry and the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). This fits in seamlessly with the policies of his predecessor, Michael Sommer.

Sommer and the then Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) declared in unison in 2013 that the relationship between the trade unions and the Army, in contrast to the past, was no longer strained, but was marked by mutual recognition.

De Maizière said: “We want to establish the spirit in which we can take [our] collaboration into the future”. Not just the trade unions, but the Bundeswehr too was part of the peace movement!

In March 2011 Sommer delivered a speech at the

Bundeswehr Academy on the topic of “The trade unions and their relationship to the Bundeswehr”. He had said that the Bundeswehr’s foreign missions had “very much contributed to relaxing the relationship between the unions and the Bundeswehr”. The unions were also interested in international stability and questions such as the safeguarding of Germany’s sources of raw materials.

The close collaboration between the DGB and the Bundeswehr met with criticism and protest from some union members. As a result, the DGB leadership held a “Peace and Security Policy Workshop” last October, tasked with bringing critics of the unions’ pro-war policy into line.

The main speaker invited by the DGB was Herfried Münkler, who teaches political theory at the Institute for Social Science at Berlin’s Humboldt University. He is also an advisor to the government and plays a key role in the present political campaign to return to an aggressive German foreign policy. The moderator of the DGB workshop was the TV journalist Paul-Elmar Jöris, a prizewinner of the Federal Academy for Security Policy, and a contributor to the advisory council for Bundeswehr Civic Education.

The article by the new DGB chief on the propaganda web pages of the foreign ministry continues this course. The union bureaucracy is responding to the mounting social crisis and worldwide political instability by moving closer to the German government, integrating itself into the state apparatus. It utilises its bureaucratic apparatus and its still remaining influence in the factories to crack down on the growing anti-war mood in the working class.

The unions have already used their influence in order to destroy social conditions and jobs, playing off workers against one another, and extorting them, as at Opel Bochum where the unions suppressed any serious opposition to the plant closure. Now they are going one step further and are offering their services to silence and intimidate opponents of war in the factories.

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