

German workers express solidarity with “yellow vest” protests in France

By our reporters
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German workers have expressed sympathy with the mass protests of the “yellow vests” in France. Many workers in Germany share the same grievances and recognise they also confront policies that favour the rich.

These views were revealed when candidates of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) interviewed workers in several locations on Friday.

In western Frankfurt at the Industriepark Höchst, some 90 companies employ more than 20,000 workers. Here, many workers are following the events in France with considerable attention.

Eric, training as a chemical technician, found the protests in France justified. “The workers in Germany can learn a thing or two from the yellow vests,” Eric told Marianne Arens, who is running for the SGP in the 2019 European elections. “They don’t simply put up with everything.” He is following their movement on Facebook: “The news is not objective. They are just out to make the yellow vests look bad, because they’re afraid it will spread here.”

There are plenty of reasons for discontent in the Industriepark Höchst: Sanofi, the French multinational pharmaceutical company, is in the process of eliminating over 300 jobs. Even jobs at Bayer AG are not secure. Bayer, which operates a research department and a pesticide manufacturing plant in Frankfurt, has announced it will wipe out 12,000 jobs. Almost everyone who passes by is acquainted with someone from Bayer and knows of their anxiety about the future. “Now the workers have to pay for the fact that Bayer spent billions [US\$66 billion] to buy Monsanto,” commented one chemical worker.

“The French are doing exactly the right thing,” said Jörg, a temporary worker in the industrial park. Years ago, he started working for Hoechst AG [then a

German chemicals company] as a permanent employee, but when Sanofi bought up the pharma business, he took the compensation package and left. Jörg explained: “These developments are also criticized in Germany, but in the end, everything is dismissed. The French go out into the street and fight back. If necessary, they join together and protest. I think that’s good. We shouldn’t have to put up all this.”

As an example, Jörg pointed out that the government has raised the retirement age to 67. “Everyone knows that it’s practically impossible for workers starting at the age of 15 and doing shift work for over 40 years to keep that up until 67. In the end, the whole thing comes down to pension cuts!” Jörg was very impressed by the movement in France, urging German workers to show solidarity and also strike, “otherwise you can’t expect that things will change.”

At the BMW plant in Berlin-Spandau, many workers also reacted positively to the protests in France. When asked to react to the yellow vests, some workers offered enthusiastic thumbs up and shouted, “That’s exactly what we have to do here!” At first, however, some workers reacted cautiously, as they had mostly heard about the rioting.

“That’s because many media outlets put out the wrong picture,” said Benni, who drives a forklift in the BMW plant. “They do not discuss what the movement stands for. It is no longer just about fuel prices, but about increasing wages and pensions, and against social inequality.”

These questions are also very relevant in Germany, he observed. “Actually, a general strike would have to be called. Things don’t move until everyone strikes together. The movement in France should become a European movement.”

Although he completed his training as a food

technician, the 27-year-old worked for years at various temporary employment agencies. Benni was originally hired as a temporary worker for a subcontractor in the BMW plant and then employed there directly, but only on a short-term contract. “Now they have just extended me for another year. Despite very good performance and low sick leave, I can’t get a permanent job.”

As a consequence, Benni cannot plan his future. He has been together with his girlfriend for three years and they want to have children, “but kids have become a luxury item today that we simply cannot afford.” The costs would rise every year, but their incomes would not.

Benni had already read the election statement of the SGP and believed that the party had good policies. Social equality must be the principle according to which society is organized.

Michael also sympathised with the movement in France and hoped for its extension. “If everyone went on strike, a general strike, then something would change!” Michael is 48 years old and works for Edeka, the largest German supermarket chain. He detailed how employees there face increasing control and pressure. He himself was relocated and now has a two-hour daily commute. He would like to move, but simply cannot due to rising rents. “This is becoming more and more like the USA. You need three jobs to keep afloat.”

For Michael, the yellow vests’ independence from unions has been particularly noteworthy, as he has had bad experiences with the unions in the past. “They just talk blab, do a little something and then simply stop.”

Berlin firefighters described similar experiences when they were asked about the yellow vests. As they have faced constantly deteriorating working conditions for years, the firefighters directly oppose Verdi (the major German trade union) and the Berlin Senate (currently a coalition of the Social Democrats, Left Party and Green Party).

Berlin firefighters joined last week with the BerlinBrennt e.V. [“Berlin is burning”] association to campaign for better working conditions. They are demanding a significant increase in allowances, regular transport and more flexible roster planning. Employees are burdened by 12-hour shifts and constant understaffing. “There has been nothing but budget cutting since 1995,” said Reinhard Hampel, head of the BerlinBrennt e.V. Berlin’s social infrastructure has

been radically weakened, especially under the Left Party-SPD coalition. Today, both parties are continuing these policies, with the support of the Greens.

Earlier this year, in March and April, hundreds of firefighters protested against the miserable working conditions that, in the end, endanger the lives of the population. Verdi and the Senate subsequently agreed to minor improvements, for which there are no deadlines. Even if the promised jobs and new equipment were to come, they would only be a drop in the bucket.

That is why workers, in the face of opposition from the unions, are once again protesting outside Berlin’s city hall. Like the protesters in France, some of them are wearing yellow safety vests.

Hampel explained this had no direct relation to the French events. Rather it was in response to a ban that prohibited officers from wearing uniforms during the protests. So the firefighters put on yellow vests.

In fact, of course, there is a connection between the Berlin fire brigade protest and the yellow vest movement in France, explained Markus Klein, SGP candidate in the European elections next year. In conversation with Hampel, Klein said: “As in France, workers are confronted not only with attacks from the government, but also from the unions. Workers across Europe are faced with the same problems, and so the movement in France is quite objectively an expression of a European movement.”

The central issue is therefore uniting the workers of the continent on the basis of a socialist program. For this perspective, the SGP is fighting together with its sister parties in France and the UK in the upcoming European elections.

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