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Germany

# Beginning of a rupture between unions and SPD

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**In Europe's economically most important country, 20 years after the last big trade union battle, a struggle has begun with consequences that go beyond Germany's borders. Thies Gleiss looks at the background.**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359151.jpg>]

In 1984 the majority of the unions organized in the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB, Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) fought a struggle for a 35-hour working week. There was a six-week strike with lockouts and an open polarization in the trade unions. A minority of unions, then called the “gang of five” (primarily the chemical workers' and mineworkers' unions) challenged union unity and negotiated with the Christian Democrat/Liberal government for a compromise involving a reduction of working hours. The Minister for Labour and CDU member Norbert Blüm passed several laws for early retirement. Today, even these timid reductions in working hours are denounced, but it is often forgotten that they were a political reaction to the much more radical demands supported by the majority of unions in struggle against mass unemployment. IG-Metall, the print workers' union and their allies - despite the hesitations of their somewhat conservative leaderships - formed new social alliances to fight for a reduction of daily and weekly working hours. The anti-nuclear movement, encouraged by the success of the Greens in the federal elections (for the first time they had succeeded in gaining representation in the Bundestag) and the huge anti-missiles movement (although already in decline) opened fruitful possibilities. Without these social movements with deep roots in society the battle for the 35-hour week would have ended as lamentably as the defeated struggle for the 35-hour week in eastern Germany last year. Chancellor Kohl condemned the 35-hour week as “stupid and absurd” (“dumm und töricht”), while the employers' organizations mobilized in an unprecedented fashion against the violation of their “catalogue of taboos”.

For the workers in struggle and especially the political left, the 1985 compromise (which foresaw the introduction of the 35 hour week by stages over a ten year period) led to great disappointment, given the promising situation after such a long and hard strike. This criticism was just, but it should all the same be said that the strike had changed the relationship of forces between the classes, with effects nearly everywhere in Europe. In any case, the unions massively blunted the central political project of a “moral-spiritual change “ that the CD/Liberal coalition (in power since 1982) had set itself. With the concept of a 35-hour week, which potentially came into conflict with the framework of capitalist society, a most powerful struggle against mass unemployment had been put on the European agenda.

## A short springtime of the workers' movement

But a hot summer or autumn did not follow this promising springtime. The union leaderships became increasingly reconciled to the conservative government of the eternal chancellor Kohl, above all after the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and German unification in 1990. The slow rhythm of the reduction of working time envisaged by the contracts was counteracted by measures of rationalization and greater flexibility as well as by stepped up rhythms of work. There was relatively little redistribution of work. Even the union said that only some 140,000 jobs had been created following the introduction of the 35-hour week. Thus, a durable mass unemployment rate of around 10% became the profound reality of West German society and after the unification of Germany, the situation got worse. In eastern Germany, the deliberate policy of deindustrialization after the Anschluss ended with a “specific economic zone” where the real unemployment rate was between a quarter and a third of the active population, where young people left the country for the west and where working time was longer, wages lower and the insolence of the capitalists greater than elsewhere. The introduction of an exchange rate of 1:1 between the GDR Mark and the FRG Deutschemark in summer 1990 produced an economic crash in the east and an economic boom

for the consumption industries in the west.

The reticence of the union leaderships and permanent mass unemployment increased pressure on wages. Over two decades, there was practically a stagnation in purchasing power. Many workers lost out on overtime payments because of contracts for greater flexibility or the implementation of an “account for annual work”. Meanwhile, every year the prices of public services and recently privatised services like post or energy (with the sole exception of telephone costs) increased. “Reforms” in the health service further reduced disposable incomes. Moreover, for 14 years, wage earners paid an additional tax called the “solidarity supplement” to finance capitalist restructuring in eastern Germany.

All this has constantly undermined the material base of the trade union movement. A poll carried out two years ago by IG-Metall presented an unequivocal picture. An overwhelming majority of members, and many non-organized or ex-members, expected from the leadership first and foremost policies for an increase of wages. But this primary task of a union, the collective sale of labour power, was increasingly not being fulfilled. At nearly every collective bargaining process the same ritual was repeated. After weeks of declarations that there was no question of accepting a bad deal a long-term agreement would follow, resulting in a lowering of real wages and a deterioration of the situation of apprentices even if the rate of inflation remained modest. This led to anger among youth and in the workplace trade union structures, because the union leaderships ignored the decisions of hundreds of workplace councils and rank and file union assemblies which voted regularly for equal increases for all (instead of a percentage) and for shorter term agreements.

## Rank and file desertion

That explains why the membership of German union, with the exception of the police union and professional organizations of train drivers, air pilots or other specific employees, has been in freefall. Most wage earners had justified doubts on whether the unions in the DGB were still a useful instrument for increasing wages and young people have lost all will to struggle for a better future. Since 1991, the DGB unions have lost a third of their members. Their spectacular increase after unification with the old unions of the GDR was reduced to zero in 10 years. The unemployed in particular left the unions en masse.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359161.jpg>]

For 20 years the reaction of the union leadership was a “modernization” of the organization. Several unions came together to form bigger regroupments, like IG-Metall which integrated the unions in wood and textiles, while the chemical workers and miners unions fused. Most prominently, there was a merger of the public services union (Ä-TV) with the media unions to form the big Ver.di federation.

This was accompanied by “structural reforms” and waves of campaigns to win new members - increasingly without concrete content. The old training schools for union cadres such as the “Academy of Labour” (Akademie der Arbeit), like other training and research institutions, were thus either closed, or separated from the unions and often privatised. Beyond this, the Kohl era and the increasingly powerful pressure of neoliberal ideology led to a dreadful political degradation after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Most union leaderships wanted a recentring of activity in the workplaces (“Verbetrieblichung”), believing this would benefit the most important dues-paying clientele, qualified non-immigrant male workers. But even this short-term calculation has foundered.

In the political domain, most union leaderships were bureaucratically linked to social democracy, but with growing

disillusionment. The role of the SPD as an inadequate “opposition” to the CDU/FDP government was accepted with bitterness, but loyally. For the electoral campaign of 1998, the union leaderships committed more than four million euros to support the SPD of Gerhard Schröder and the Greens of Joschka Fischer. But after the victory of the red-green coalition disappointment was rapid and the unions were several times duped by “their” government.

## A pact for jobs?

Inaugurated following a proposal from the head of IG-Metall, Zwickel, in the mid-1990s, the “pact for jobs” (Bündnis für Arbeit) was buried after fruitless negotiations. These meetings of “social partners” - involving government, unions and employers' organizations - came to nothing. The employers even began to mock them and to show their lack of interest by stressing that the union leaders were not ready to make concessions. After an attempt to renew the pact for jobs in 1998, chancellor Schröder showed less and less interest in this concept. The Greens, among whom adversaries of trades unionism are legion, openly denigrated it.

The theory of the “third way” - which Schröder borrowed from Tony Blair - denounced the idea of a social pact because, despite the servility and will for collaboration of the union leaderships, this idea is founded on a vision of society divided into social classes and torn by antagonistic interests. Schröder increasingly preferred to have recourse to extra parliamentary commissions of experts and his “ethical council” which made proposals to be carried through “one to one” without negotiations. As negotiations around the “pact for jobs” foundered, Schröder showed his impatience and treated union chiefs with contempt.

If the 16 years of rule by Helmut Kohl were years of lead for the trade union movement, the years of the red-green coalition became a permanent humiliation. Interrupted only by the electoral campaign of 2002, the coalition developed a neoliberal and anti-trade union policy, which its predecessors had never dared to do with such radicalism. The social democrats and the Greens were thus bringing about a genuine “moral-spiritual” change in Germany.

Basically, this policy contained two programmatic positions:

1. A programme of reduction of wages and social security contributions, to increase private capital's rate of profit;
2. Consistent efforts to defend and develop Germany's position in the “new world order” through economic, diplomatic and also military means.

At least since the reelection of Schröder in 2002, the expression “our labour costs are too high” has dominated German political discussions. This discourse accompanies attacks against wage earners on every front. The argument is that wage earners should renounce a part of their wages, called the “second wage” which comprises pensions, social security and unemployment benefits. In total this amounts to 180 billion euros. The bosses considered this to be too high. Although in principle employees and bosses each pay half, in reality this amounts to a part of the mass of wages set aside for the future. Reductions in pensions, reimbursement of medical costs and sick pay have already favoured private insurance. But that is not enough for the employers, who see in the privatization of pension and sickness insurance systems a profitable terrain for insurance companies and banks.

Since 1998, the trade union movement has on several occasions made significant concessions in the area of social contributions. It has accepted the partial privatization of pensions and it calmed the growing resistance against the payment of a part of the price of medicines and an entry tax of 10 euros for medical care. These concessions from the union leaderships were so rapid that it was no longer even possible to revise the programmes and decisions of the union conferences, which had been previously made. But the most serious problem is the acceptance by the

unions of the logic of the “exorbitant second wage”.

In addition to wage earners, jobless youth and the retired constituted the second target for Schröder's “third way”. Mass unemployment costs society 65 billion euros per year and the pensions still more. Besides reductions in employers' contributions there were political decisions for a reduction of pensions and above all a reduction of unemployment benefit so that it is paid for 12 months at maximum (18 months for those aged 55 and over) instead of 32 months. In the framework of the Hartz laws the unemployed were attacked on three fronts. The amount and duration of benefits were reduced, the rules governing what can be demanded from an unemployed person in terms of accepting a new job were stiffened and now sometimes resemble forced labour. The unemployed are being steered towards the “low wage sector” which the bosses, experts and government hope to develop. This sector will be accompanied by part time and temporary work to bring pressure on the labour market and thus reduce wages overall.

In agreeing to negotiations on the Hartz laws, the union leaderships accepted a policy diametrically opposed to the decisions of their congresses and the policy previously decided. That is true especially of temporary work, which according to all the polls is mistrusted and rejected by virtually all the German people. Note that the current programme of the SPD still envisages the banning of temporary work!

Recently, for the first time since the Third Reich, capital and the state have launched an offensive to prolong daily, weekly and annual working time; in other words, capital is trying to increase absolute surplus value, as Marx would put it. Already, some provinces (Länder) have introduced a 41 or 42-hour week for civil servants (who have no right to strike in Germany). This prolongation is to be extended to the public sector as a whole and then to private industry. There is a discussion on the reduction of the number of bank holidays and annual holiday time. There are also plans to push the age of retirement up to 67 or even later. Behind all these plans, there is one single idea, to lower wages. In the contractual negotiations this spring, the employers demanded that IG Metall accept a prolongation of working time without any wage increase, but this was rejected. Unhappily the union leadership agreed exceptions in case of companies experiencing difficulties of an enterprise. That means that there are now exceptions to the general rule of the 35-hour week, even if the direct attack has been beaten back.

## Lost strike in the east

Schröder repeats incessantly that he sees no alternative to a policy of reducing wages; for him it is a constraint on the globalization the country must learn to live with.

The second main point of his government's programme, the reintroduction of the military in German politics, has been described by Schröder as his most important historic mission. What a decline for a chancellor of the party of Bebel, Schumacher and Willy Brandt!

Despite some reticence, the union leaderships have accepted this path towards rearmament and war. They have unnecessarily renounced a key element of the identity of German trades unionism. With one exception - the head of Ver.di, Frank Bsirske, a member of the Greens - all are SPD members.

Since the capitalist unification of Germany, there have been serious inequalities in wages and working time between east and west German workers. In the city of Berlin these are sometimes so grotesque that the side of the street you live on decides your wage and working hours! The fact that IG Metall finally dared to launch a struggle for 35 hours, even if it was not successful, witnessed to a certain courage. There were long debates in the bureaucracy, dominated by functionaries of western origin, which developed into a factional battle. The strike for a reduction of working hours

was lost in an exemplary fashion. After three weeks on strike, during which IG Metall in the east committed numerous tactical mistakes, the head of the union announced in the press - without having obtained anything and without a vote - that the strike was over. Before this, some union functionaries and above all heads of works councils in western factories (particularly in the cars sector) indirectly affected by the eastern strike through declarations that were completely disloyal to the union.

After the strike, IG Metall experienced an intense factional struggle, which ended in the election of two leaders from opposed tendencies, Jürgen Peters and Berthold Huber, in harness so that the leadership could calm tensions. The lost strike had shown starkly that the power of the unions in Germany - the great pride of those sectors of social democracy still oriented towards the workers' movement - was no longer worth much. The DGB, known as the "sleeping giant" because for a long time it did not lose members (or strikes!), even in times of crisis, began to fissure. The disorientation of the unions seemed to have reached its apogee.

## Awakening of the left

But the year 2003 also awoke the rest of the union left, which had experienced a rather lamentable existence for some years. There were still organized political left groups who tried, with much energy, but without great success, to get the unions moving. And when, in the context of contractual negotiations, there were warning strikes, it was always this left which took the initiative. Yet autonomous activities in the workplaces - of the kind known in Italy, France, Greece or even Britain - were rarer in Germany than snow in Palermo. The federal coordination "network of the trade union left" was rather a discussion circle of individuals without influence and even without the will to push things forwards.

For the first time, during the parliamentary debate on the laws seeking a partial privatization of pensions, protest meetings took place, organized by the independent left. The pension laws, presented by Walter Riester, the former number two of IG Metall who had become minister of labour, could not be blocked. But these initiatives by the left had as their consequence the formation of new local groups of the trade union left. During contractual negotiations in spring 2004, for the first time since the 1970s, a trade union left appeared, presenting an independent perspective and publishing its own pamphlets.

In 2003, particularly after the chancellor's speech of March 13 announcing the famous "agenda 2010", for the first time in a long time, we could see critical reactions from the largely depoliticized union rank and file. Those who had always voted for the SPD because they hoped the party worked for a capitalism with a human voice, with job security and better wages, began to revolt. Those who were still SPD members left the party en masse. At the time of Helmut Schmidt, the party still had a million members; in 20 years this figure fell to 630,000, with a loss of nearly 50,000 in 2003 alone. Many current members are ashamed to admit it. According to polls, less than 30% of voters would now vote SPD. The district of Dortmund, a traditional fiefdom of the SPD, now has more members than the entire former GDR. For some time the SPD has been losing every election and pollsters speak of a deep loss of confidence in the party among wage earners.

In May 2003, the SPD union leadership tried one last time to organize a protest against government policies as in the old days, but this time the meetings and demonstrations organized in several cities did not gather more than 90,000 participants. Some days later, Theo Sommer, the head of the DGB, announced the "summer pause", an expression which has now entered into literature.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359171.jpg>]

History has taken another path. In the framework of the summer university of ATTAC-Germany, cadres of the

independent left in the workplaces and the unions decided to call a national demonstration in Berlin on November 1. At the same time, political strikes took place, against the decisions of the government and the debates in the Bundestag, on the Hartz laws. To respect form, these strikes were presented as wishing to ensure the contractual autonomy guaranteed by the Constitution, but in reality they were strikes against the SPD and the government's policies. The union rank and file mobilized massively for the Berlin demonstration. In the 10 days before the demonstration we saw a union mobilization without directives "from above", but with a certain complicity from the leadership. The result was that more than 100,000 people protested in Berlin against the policies of the red-green government.

When, during the European Social Forum (ESF), a European day of action was conceived and when the April 2 and 3 were fixed as the date for this, it became clear to everyone that a much bigger mobilization than that of May 2003 and even than that of November in Berlin was needed. The ESF had seen for the first time the public participation of a German union leader, Frank Bsirske of Ver.di. He said he favoured a new alliance between unions and social movements - it is more than 20 years since such language had been heard at the top of the trade union movement. A period of free debate has begun and those who have worked in this milieu for years understand and appreciate this change of political climate.

The preceding weekend the demonstrations of April 3, 2004 saw the founding conference of the left in Ver.di. For the first time, an oppositional current - which is not the sectarian project of a left groupuscule and cannot be easily denigrated by the union leadership - addressed the public.

## A new workers' party

Two regroupments to discuss the problem of a political alternative to social democracy have for the moment dominated press coverage, one in Berlin and the other in Northern Bavaria. If these two tendencies have the merit of being the first to address the public (even that is debatable), they are not the only ones and do not necessarily have the most interesting proposals. In any case, the situation is on the move almost everywhere.

Maybe we are living through the final crisis of the 150-year marriage between the trade union movement and social democracy. Unlike the situation in Britain, this marriage has always been political. Despite the structural and organic relations between the SPD and the union, there has been an organizational independence, which results from the development of the SPD as autonomous workers party rather than a party of the unions. If now the political link between the SPD and union is in the process of dissolving, the consequences will affect millions of heads and hearts; and the left should react with a new form of mass politics, which was never possible in past decades.

The big demonstrations of April 3 in Berlin, Cologne and Stuttgart were a small indication of this. They represented the dialectical unity of an organization from "above" and a mobilization, largely autonomous, "from below".

The union bureaucrats, who in the past have blocked or held back many mobilizations, are being pushed aside; history is being made. Meanwhile we should avoid repelling those full timers who, for decades, have stuck with the SPD and who feel like orphans today. The process of differentiation runs through the union movement, more or less rapidly according to the concrete conditions. The union movement finds itself facing the huge task of beating back the massive attacks on the working class - employed and unemployed - in Germany and internationally. At the same time people around the world hope that the German workers' movement can abort a "seizure of world power" by German capital. There are two tasks of historic dimension!

Nobody knows the outcome of the struggles to come. On the road of separation with social democracy, the union

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movement can of course be defeated, if it seeks to avoid the necessary confrontations with capital and the government. The result will be a US style unionism. The task of the left is to bar the way to such a development. The maintenance of a big unitary confederation, negotiating collective agreements according to the principle of a strong solidarity with the weak and guaranteeing pluralism of positions and currents - this idea of trade unionism is well worth the necessary effort.