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Germany

100,000 demonstrate against austerity in Berlin

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In it early 2003 German trade union leaderships withdrew from the “alliance for jobs” (Bündnis für Arbeit) because was clear that the Federation of German Industry (Bund Deutscher Industrie, BDI) was determined on massive reductions in social contributions and the renegotiation of collective agreements to introduce greater flexibility. Federal chancellor Schröder told the Bundestag on March 13, 2003 that “We must reduce state benefits, favour individual responsibility and demand more effort from everyone”.

The trade unions spoke of their historic alliance with social democracy coming apart and began to mobilize for May 1. However, in reality the union leaderships wished to avoid a head on confrontation. So there were good mobilizations in some sectors and towns, but a federal movement did not really emerge; the union leaderships still believed that the left wing of the SPD (and the Greens) could at least moderate the attacks of the red-green coalition against the system of social protection. Nonetheless at the special SPD conference in Berlin in June about 90% of the delegates voted for the proposals of the Schröder leadership.

The union leaderships who had stressed lobbying inside the SPD and the Greens seemed paralyzed. Several months of great frustration followed, particularly after the declaration of the president of the German trade union confederation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB), Theo Sommer, that the decision of the SPD conference could not be changed.

A coalition of “Alliances against Hartz” [1] above all in the Rhin-Main region, and some far left groups called for an “action conference” which appealed for a big demonstration on November 1 in Berlin. Significant support came from the conferences of unions like Ver.di and IG Metall, where interventions from the union left won the day, but the national leaderships did nothing in practice to support the November 1 demonstration so everything depended on which way the local leaderships would go.

A change in popular sentiment developed through the autumn. Almost every day the government or one of its ministers announced a new austerity measure, generating bitterness among rank and file unionists and stimulating mobilization. More than 300 coaches came to Berlin and the demonstration began with some 400,000 people; in the course of the march many Berliners joined it spontaneously. Visibly the culture of Genoa, Nice and Florence had spread to Germany and to the astonishment of observers, an atmosphere of joie de vivre and solidarity predominated.

For trade unionists in particular, this was a very significant event. After Berlin, a dozen regional demonstrations against the policy of the federal government were held. Against the policies of the governments of the Länder, in Wiesbaden and Munich, demonstrations drew respectively 50,000 and 40,000 people. A new student movement is being born with demonstrations in many university towns.

Now we need to work to bring together the critical union currents and the global justice movement. In dozens of towns there are already social forums and the German delegation to the European Social Forum in Paris-Saint-Denis was 3,000 strong. It is vital now that we strengthen our work for the construction of a German Social Forum to provide a counter to the logic of competition propagated by all the parliamentary parties.

[1] for details of the Hartz proposals, see "[Reds, greens and 'reform'](#)" IV 353