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Germany

A real missed opportunity

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On May 15, 2002, the German engineering union IG Metall (IGM) reached an agreement with the employers in Baden-Wuerttemberg which ended the first struggle in the engineering sector (a key sector in Germany) for some years.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/08igm.jpg>]

In fact, the struggle had only just begun. It had been shown that the engineers were still capable of struggling despite the enormous distrust for a union leadership which for some years has not just avoided struggle but also signed collective agreements below the rate of inflation.

The strike was organized on a rolling basis with one-day stoppages in different workplaces. The potential was already visible after four days of the strike (with 90,000 strikers having participated), not only in the big factories like Daimler-Chrysler (Mercedes), Porsche, Bosch and so on but also in a number of small and medium workplaces. In the big factories in particular, participation was almost total and the employers feared that this could develop into a more autonomous struggle with a dynamic that the trade union leadership could no longer control. This is what led to the opening of new negotiations on May 13.

What result?

The agreement signed on May 15 has not yet been accepted by the respective decision-making bodies and has not yet been adopted in all the regions, but this will probably happen without great difficulty.

The agreement is in two parts. First, there is an initial reform of the salary scale tending to abolish the traditional distinction between 'employee' and 'worker'. The idea is to have (after some years) an equal wage for all these people who do the same or comparable work (although discrimination against women will not be tackled) In this equalization nobody should lose money, there will only be adjustments upwards.

A certain number of people (above all those right at the bottom of the salary scale but also workers doing the work of 'employees') will have a wage increase well above the average. However, the details are still to be negotiated and the results will be codified in a second contract (perhaps at the end of the year). These details will be very complicated and their application will also depend on the relationship of forces in the workplaces. To give an idea of what one can expect: nearly 4% of workers (above all women) will profit from the abolition of the lowest category and will have an increase of at least 7-9%. Apart from this 10-15% of people will benefit appreciably from the new categories which will be established in the coming years.

A lot depends now on the activity of the IGM union - particularly in the workplaces and works councils - to ensure that these new categories are not lower for everybody who is hired subsequently (such a process has taken place in the chemical industry, where a comparable reform was decided on more than 10 years ago).

The decisive criterion: volume

At the centre of our critique nonetheless is the 'volume of increase of wages'. The union had demanded 6.5% and the

leadership had said publicly that it would do better than the chemicals sector (3.3%). Now it has accepted an agreement over 22 months (March 1, 2002 to December 31, 2003) with 0% for March and April 2002, 120 Euros for May 2002, 4% for the 12 following months and 3.1% for the 7 months afterwards, which equals 3.46% (for the average 'employee-worker').

That volume is in two categories: 3.1% increase in general wage (June 1, 2002 to May 30, 2003) and 2.6% (July 1, 2003 to December 31, 2003) the remainder (0.9% and 0.5%) being added to the second category to finance the 'equalization of wages'. In 2002 and 2003, the salary scale will increase by an average of 3.1%.

Even if the volume which will be used for 'equalization' is added the increase is only 3.46%, well below the 4% which had been declared the minimum by the bureaucracy. In the big factories in particular, the disappointment is palpable.

What consequences?

As a considerable number of workers will receive a relatively generous increase there will not be any generalized revolt. The majority will accept the results but for most of them there will only be a 3.46% increase, below this famous rate of 4% which the bureaucracy had declared a minimum. What counts for the future of the union and the whole union movement in Germany is that at last the chance was there to fight, to make up for losses in real wages in recent years and to emerge from the general defensive. It was the best chance for at least 15 years, but the bureaucracy feared the struggle and defended the interests of German capital on the international markets as well as the desire of Chancellor Schroeder who appealed to the union not to 'imperil the German economy'.

The real struggle never took place as it would have been necessary to strike for at least two or three succeeding days per workplace (or at least in the majority of workplaces). That would have been very easy, given the success of the early days. There was no evidence of a weakening of resolve anywhere. The test of strength was yet to come and the majority of workers expected and wanted revenge, wanted to profit from the occasion to act together.

The blame for the failure to take this enormous opportunity (through according more importance to the interests of German capital and Schroeder's electoral prospects than to class interests) reveals the criminal political rottenness of the union bureaucracy. There is then much to do for the small forces of the trade union left and revolutionary Marxists will play their full part.