

Trade unions in lock step with the German government

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In the face of growing transatlantic tensions, trade war, military rearmament, rapid technological change, massive social cuts and growing resistance among workers, the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) is stepping up its collaboration with the government. That is the quintessence of the DGB Congress, which took place on Sunday in Berlin.

Every four years, several hundred union officials gather, calling their meeting a “Parliament of Labour.” Representatives of the government and the various political parties are always invited. But this year, the alliance between the trade unions and the government was particularly pronounced. The federal president, the chancellor, the finance minister and vice chancellor, the labour minister and the families minister, as well as leading representatives of almost all parties, appeared at the DGB congress.

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier spoke immediately after the welcome address of DGB leader Reiner Hoffmann. He began by saying, “We live amid great upheavals. Certainties that seemed irrefutable a few years ago are beginning to waver.” Since the Brexit vote in 2016, and especially since the US elections, the world is hardly recognizable, he said. “Uncertainty, retreat into nationalism, populism” are spreading everywhere.

The consequences of these changes had to be discussed at the trade union conference, he declared. The central questions were: “Is the centre of our society stable? Does social cohesion remain—between the wealthy and those on low-incomes, between city and country, east and west? Can we reverse the trend of societies polarizing? And if so, how?”

Steinmeier then focused on a question that, as he said, had the potential “to amplify the centrifugal forces in our society”—technological change.

Digitization and all the “waves of technical progress” had been developing ever faster. They “deeply affect all

areas of life.” He knew the “worries and fears” about the effects of this development in the factories.

However, he did not share the “doomsday scenarios” that are often disseminated. The claim that half of all jobs were at risk was exaggerated.

Nevertheless, there was no denying that technological change was “having a massive impact on the world of work.” The trade unions and government had to make great efforts to shape this development in the interest of employees.

On Monday, Reiner Hoffmann put the same question at the centre of his keynote speech. Digitalisation was rapidly driving social change, he said.

“The smartphone has been on the market for only a few years—and it has changed our social life in unimaginable ways.” In business, “artificial intelligence and machine learning” were being developed. The “Internet of Things” meant that everything should be networked with everything else: “Smart robots in factories or care robots in hospitals and nursing homes. Online commerce, service platforms for cleaning, driving or deliveries.”

All this was changing working conditions from the ground up, he said. “Digital crowd and click workers, without any labour or social protection and often paid terribly,” should no longer be tolerated, he declared.

The fear of the socially explosive power of a fast-growing “digital day-labour force” was unmistakable in his speech. Again and again, he appealed to the government and the European Union to create a legal framework to better control this development.

But while the DGB leader justifies his call for closer collaboration with the government with a barrage of phrases about the “social design” and “humanization of the world of work,” in reality, something completely different is taking place. The unions are closing ranks with the government to stifle any resistance in the factories against low wages, rising workloads and job

losses.

Technological progress is creating unprecedented opportunities to overcome poverty, raise living standards, improve care for the sick and the elderly, and to invest billions in education and culture. But under capitalism, the opposite happens. Modern technologies are used to increase exploitation and drive up profits, while at the same time exacerbating the global battle for markets and resources—ultimately, as in the Middle East, with the use of military force.

In this conflict, the DGB and its component trade unions stand fully on the side of the capitalists and their government. They act as company police, intimidating workers and developing their own rationalization plans. VW works council head Bernd Osterloh, one of the most powerful and highest-paid union princes of Germany, recently told business daily *Handelsblatt* that he regarded it as his task to streamline the corporate structure in order to improve synergies and increase the efficiency and international competitiveness of Europe's largest car company.

The DGB also collaborates closely with the government politically. It supports the return of militarism and the establishment of a police state that ultimately targets the working class.

Hoffmann's lament over growing social tensions and the drastic deterioration of working conditions cannot hide the fact that these conditions were created by a government with which the unions have been collaborating closely for years. Who led the Labour Ministry over the past few years if not the Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose executive and committees include Hoffmann and a large number of DGB functionaries? Who passed the Hartz laws attacking welfare and labour rights, imposed low-wage labour and thereby created the conditions for the growing army semi-employed workers?

The DGB campaigned for the grand coalition of the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in the months leading up to the formation of the new government, even though its foreign and domestic policies make it the most right-wing administration since the Nazi era. At the DGB Congress, this reactionary policy became clearly visible. The DGB supports military rearmament, the social cuts necessary to pay for this and all measures strengthening the competitiveness of the German economy.

When DGB boss Hoffmann welcomed the federal president on Sunday, he recalled that in his former role as foreign minister, Steinmeier had spoken of the fact that

the world was out of joint and Germany had to shoulder more responsibility. At that time, Steinmeier had established a Foreign Ministry website—*Review 2014*—to promote Germany's great power politics, which advocated more foreign missions of the Bundeswehr (German armed forces), amongst other things.

The authors of this site also included DGB boss Hoffmann, who was fully behind military rearmament. His predecessor too, Michael Sommer, had maintained close contact with the Bundeswehr. At that time, in a joint declaration by the trade unions and the Bundeswehr, the DGB had, in all seriousness, claimed that the unions and the Bundeswehr were both part of the peace movement. A short time later, the DGB participated in the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Bundeswehr.

The so-called unitary collective bargaining law, passed by the government almost three years ago, serves to suppress resistance in the factories. Then-labour minister and now SPD party leader Andrea Nahles, in collaboration with Hoffmann, drafted the law, which undermines workers' constitutionally enshrined rights.

The unitary collective bargaining law limits the right to strike and the right to freedom of association. It grants the DGB a monopoly in collective bargaining, making it a form of compulsory union, similar to the German labour front under the Nazis. Since the DGB unions have been collaborating very closely with the employers and the government for years, while at the same time exercising great influence on companies and administrations through their works council members and shop stewards, the law aims to suppress any resistance or independent movement of workers.

The DGB congress in Berlin makes clear how consciously the trade unions act as a fifth column of government and capital against the working class.



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