

Germany: Class struggle opposition organising in the unions

Frederik Haber Fri, 28/02/2020 - 18:15

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On January 25/26, Frankfurt/Main saw a 'Conference on Strategy' organised by and for left trade unionists. About 150 militants answered the call from the Network for Militant Trade-unions, VKG. They represented a wide range of sectors; large scale engineering, public sector, precarious workers and unemployed. Many of them had a record of long standing and recent struggles, including a series of clashes with the apparatus and bureaucratic leaderships of the trade unions.

Many of the activists were organised not only in unions, but also in 'far left' left reformist, centrist or revolutionary organisations. The Gruppe ArbeiterInnenmacht supported the conference from the beginning and its militants intervened from the platform, in workshops and we also outlined our proposal for the conference in a leaflet (<http://arbeiterinnenmacht.de/2020/01/22/antibuerokratisch-organisiert-an...>^[1]), arguing for the conference to take first steps towards the creation of a rank and file movement.

Apart from Gruppe ArbeiterInnenmacht militants from the two splits from the CWI, SoL (Sozialistische Organisation Solidarität), SAV (Sozialistische Alternative; CWI section), Internationale Sozialistische Organisation (USFI), some Maoist and Stalinist organisations like DKP (German Communist Party), Arbeit und Zukunft, Trotz Alledem and migrant organisations like DIDF (Federation of Democratic Workers' Associations) were present.

Clearly, this is only a small start in terms of numbers, but it was the first national convention of class struggle fighters to discuss the question of a strategy in the trade unions and to turn them into fighting organisations. They discussed the crisis of the unions in Germany and decided to organise as the 'Network for militant trade unions'. A step forward, but will it measure up to the necessary tasks?

Social partnership

The crisis of the trade unions is a crisis of the 'social partnership' policy, the German form of class collaboration. The support of the reformist leaders in the SPD, Left Party and the unions for German imperialism is based on maintaining the great strength of Germany, its industrial base, its industrial exports and its economic domination of Europe, the EU and, beyond that, in the rest of the world. For this goal, the general interests of the working class are subordinated to the needs of the dominant capitalists in exchange for bribes for the labour bureaucracy and gifts for the upper layers of the working class, the labour aristocracy.

The result is that the class is divided into many different layers. Even in the same workplace, some may earn more than twice as much others. On the one hand, the majority of workers are no longer represented by the works-councils, that are based on a law. More than half of the workforce no longer receive wages subject to collective agreements between trade unions and employers' organisations. Union membership

is at an all time low with just 6 million members. About a third of the work force is in the low-wage sector and/or in precarious work conditions.

On the other hand, in the highly organised sectors such as the car industry, the engineering union, IG Metall, is involved in very close collaboration with capital and government. This collaboration allows relatively high pay-rises for the core workforce and additional benefits, a 35 hour week in the west, 38 in the east, 6 weeks of paid leave, at 150 percent of salary, and additional free days for child-care etc.

The price for this is to support the German car industry to compete on the world market, support for EU-regulations on emissions and tacit silence on the tricking of car buyers by the companies, support for the bosses? turn to e-mobility and digitalisation of industry and administration. The union limits its demands to ?co-managing? the changes in German industry and accepts the out-sourcing of production, high numbers of temporary and precarious workers and even attacks on the right to strike, for smaller unions in particular.

Between these two extremes there are many variations, the class is more and more divided as the trade union leaders have agreed to lower standards for new workers and saved those of the old. The basic feeling of solidarity has been undermined. Whilst the bureaucracy and the vast majority of the officials and work place representatives are still controlled by the SPD and, to a much lesser extent, by the Left Party, the conciliatory politics have not only weakened the unions, they have also allowed the right populist AfD to gain votes amongst workers, including even significant parts of the trade union membership in some elections.

Adaptation by the Left Party

When it was formed in 2007, the Left Party represented some hope for change in the trade unions. Well known left leaders like Klaus Ernst or Bernd Riexinger joined the party and took over leading positions. Riexinger, who is now one of the party?s two leaders, initiated conferences under the title ?renewal by strike?. The last one of these took place in Brunswick in early 2019 with 700 attending.

But, despite the fact that the Left party attracted a strong influx from trade union representatives and full-timers breaking from social democracy, these either adapted to the mainstream of the trade union bureaucracy or remained an integral, though ?left?, part of it.

The break from the SPD that ended in the formation of the Left Party was neither a break with reformism, nor with the classical reformist division of labour with the party being responsible for ?politics? (elections) and the unions for wages and conditions. Just as the trade unionist would not criticise openly the parliamentary factions, the party would not criticise social partnership by its members in the workplace or union. Occasional speeches about socialism, therefore, are just a left cover for the daily class collaboration of the Left Party?s bureaucrats, just as they are for social democrats.

The full timers and leaders of the Left Party inside the trade unions are perhaps a bit more radical in their speeches, might organise a few more actions, but they accept completely the dominant strategy of ?social partnership?. Even though this is not fully understood by most centrists, in Brunswick a year ago it became clear that the conference would only exchange models for campaigning, examples of ?best practice?, but no general debate on the crisis of the unions would take place. A common agreement for struggle in the trade unions and a common oppositional framework would not even be considered. However, 70 people gathered in a fringe meeting at the conference and decided to organise a meeting to discuss a strategy for change and to organise for militant trade union opposition.

The Frankfurt meeting showed their efforts were successful. Significantly, the conference was self-financed, unlike Left Party conferences, which can use state funds channelled through the Rosa-

Luxemburg-Foundation under party control. In 8 seminars and 5 meetings of industrial branches, views were exchanged and plans for coordinated initiatives were developed. In a final declaration, these points were put together and adopted and a leading body was elected. The final declaration states amongst others:

?How we want to contribute to the change in strategy!

"We - colleagues - in different industries, companies and trade unions - are committed to a change of strategy in the trade unions. Individual militant company groups have set good examples that need to be further developed. We believe, however, that this alone is not enough, but that it is necessary that we systematically network and organise ourselves better in the fight for a change of strategy in the trade unions, which puts an end to the policy of social partnership and the acceptance of the logic of profit.

To this end, we want to make alternative proposals in our trade unions and across trade union boundaries on the ground, as well as to support each other: be it in building up structures in previously unorganised areas, be it in supporting industrial action that is inadequately led by the trade union leadership, be it in conducting consistently led industrial action - without false compromises - against the attacks of capital. We want to push through a change of strategy within the trade unions. We also want to make a contribution to stopping the rise of right-wing populists who are also trying to gain a foothold in the companies.?

And it concludes:

?We are convinced that we can succeed in strengthening an alternative to co-management and acquiescence in the trade unions. Our network is open to all those who want to take a combative course. Many of us also believe that trade unions must be prepared to engage with the bosses and capital, and to go beyond the boundaries of the capitalist system in order to be able to consistently defend the interests of workers in times of emerging crisis.?

A quite ambitious list of common activities was decided, including organising an intervention in the upcoming wage struggles in the metal-working industry, public service and public transport and concerning the agreement for temporary workers. Common activities for the 8th of March and 1st of May were also agreed. In order to rally and organise local branches and coordinate action, it also adopted a series of demands as an initial platform, including:

?Rather than co-management and a focus on social partnership: Mobilising and exploiting the trade unions? fighting power with a pilot effect for others. (?)

?Abolition of precarious employment relationships, minimum wage of 13 euros, immediate termination of temporary employment contracts (...).

Abolition of Hartz IV and for a living wage of 1300 euro (?)

For an unlimited right to strike - up to and including political strikes (?)

Mobilisation and struggle for a massive public investment programme, financed by taxation of record assets and profits. (?)

For the active information about the struggles taking place on an international level, building international connections and solidarity against the prevailing location logic.?

Whilst, clearly, the platform is vague in a number of respects, the outcome of the conference represents a success, a starting point for the future that we need to build upon.

Background

For almost two decades, activists left of left reformism have been marginalised in the German trade unions. A demonstration against the attack on the right to strike 5 years ago with several thousand participants had been the only visible activity beyond struggles in individual workplaces. The Frankfurt Conference laid the basis for a change and one that can be decisive in the coming capitalist crisis and also for more international solidarity. An attempt to invite a French railway worker failed for technical reasons but showed the commitment of the organisers.

The participants came by a large majority from left organisations or were mobilised by them. This is no wonder as critical rank and file activists need a political understanding that the bad political situation of their local works-council leaders or trade union officials is related to their general political approach and not only with laziness or corruption.

Whilst a number of far left organisations intervened and indeed played a key role in the conference, there was no one from Marx21, the German partner of the SWP-B, and probably the largest Trotskyist centrist group in Germany. This reflects their full integration into the apparatus of the Left Party, in the trade union sphere as in others, and their extreme adaptation to reformism.

Of course, even the supporters of the VKG do not all share the same positions. Indeed, there are important differences on the question of the unions, their character and what kind of struggle, strategy and programme we need to break up the control of the bureaucracy. Clearly, there is a lack of understanding of the nature of 'pure' trade-unionism itself. Whilst for revolutionary Marxists this constitutes a form of bourgeois consciousness and politics, probably a majority of the lefts who met in Frankfurt, including the centrist organisations, see it as a form of 'spontaneous', elementary, proletarian class consciousness.

This is also related to the understanding of the trade union bureaucracy and the apparatus. Generally, the bureaucracy is seen as a problem because it makes the wrong decisions, there is a lack of understanding that it is an instrument of the bourgeoisie inside the organisation of the working class, an instrument that has to be broken and replaced in the fight to win the working class for its historic tasks. The VKG will be under permanent threat that left moves or 'offers' by the bureaucracy, mediated through the Left Party, for example, will encourage adaptation to it.

The VKG is, nonetheless, a real opportunity to organise working class activists and support their struggles which are in conflict with the apparatus if they take place in 'organised' workplaces and are most likely to be left isolated in unorganised sectors of the class.

It is an opportunity to clarify the central political question of the class in Germany, a chance for revolutionaries to explain the concept of an anti-bureaucratic, rank-and-file movement, its relation to the need to form a revolutionary party, and to win working class militants to fight for such a perspective.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/germany-class-struggle-opposition-organising-unions>

Links:

[1] <http://arbeiterinnenmacht.de/2020/01/22/antibuerokratisch-organisiert-antikapitalistisch-basisbewegung-fuer-eine-klassenkaempferische-gewerkschaftspolitik/>