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Ulrich Rippert
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Widespread anti-war sentiment at May Day demonstrations in Germany

Workers and youth used the traditional May Day rallies of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) to protest against the government's war policy and the danger of a Third World War. The gigantic rearmament spending of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and the delivery of tanks and other heavy weapons to Ukraine came in for especially fierce criticism.

At the rally in Düsseldorf, Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) was shouted down as a “warmonger,” and in Berlin, the city's Mayor Franziska Giffey (SPD) was pelted with eggs.



Chancellor Scholz at the May Day rally in Düsseldorf

As state elections are taking place in a fortnight in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous and heavily industrialised state, the DGB had invited the chancellor to be the keynote speaker in the state capital, Düsseldorf. Scholz wanted to deliver a demagogic speech to kick off the final sprint of the state election campaign.

He began by praising May Day as a "day of international solidarity," only to declare that the "common struggle for democracy, freedom and peace" required full support for Ukraine. In addition to money and humanitarian aid, weapons deliveries were also necessary for this, he said.

From the start, the mood at the rally was hostile towards Scholz and the war course of the "traffic light" coalition government of the SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens. The many DGB officials, who had been shipped in to provide some friendly faces, could barely follow the chancellor's words as the booing and shouts of "warmongers" grew louder and louder. Self-made signs and banners read: "Nuclear war—are you crazy???" "De-escalate instead of provoke!" "Olaf Scholz—not my chancellor" and again and again, "Warmongers!"

Scholz, who normally reads his speeches quietly with all the charisma of an office manager, reacted wildly and aggressively. He tried to shout down his opponents, yelling back, "I respect all pacifism. But it must seem cynical to a citizen of Ukraine to be told to defend himself against Putin's aggression without weapons. That is from another era."

Scholz's appearance in Düsseldorf made clear that the government would not give in to the growing pressure from below but will move to suppress it aggressively and violently. Düsseldorf police are now investigating persons unknown for gross disruption of the rally, analysing video recordings to identify the hecklers.

The mood at the central rally in Berlin mirrored that in Düsseldorf. In the capital, the opposition was not only directed against the federal government but mainly against the Berlin state government. It had passed a new budget a few weeks ago and adopted massive austerity measures. The state government, consisting of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, has slashed the budget from more than €40 billion to €36.4 billion this year and €35.7 billion next year. Above all, savings will be made in the already completely ailing school system and in the health care sector.

A campaign appearance the previous evening in Ahrensburg, near Hamburg, by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens) was also loudly disrupted by demonstrators. (State elections will also be held next Sunday in Schleswig-Holstein.) Mostly young people attacked Baerbock with chants calling her a “warmonger.” Earlier, an election rally with Baerbock in Lübeck had been cancelled as a precaution. It was reported that unknown persons had sprayed butyric acid there.

The DGB and its individual trade unions fully support the federal government’s war policy and the austerity measures being introduced by the Länder (federal states). Two days after Scholz had announced a €100 billion rearmament programme and arms deliveries to Ukraine in the Bundestag (parliament), the IG Metall union and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) published a joint statement in which they “emphatically” supported the sanctions measures against Russia.

But they are also keenly aware of the growing war opposition in factories and offices, in the social sector, in hospitals, nursing homes and schools. Their dense network of union shop stewards keeps them informed about this.

The unions regard their task as suppressing this opposition. That is why they tried to square the circle at the May Day rallies, managing to invoke peace while supporting the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler in one and the same speech.

At the rally at the Brandenburg Gate, DGB leader Reiner Hoffmann said, “Next week, we will again celebrate May 8 [the day Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies]. This day of liberation stands for us as a symbol of the end of the Nazi reign of terror and the horrors of the Second World War. Never again war! That is the central lesson for us from this terrible past.”

The Russian attack on Ukraine, Hoffmann continued, was causing such “certainties that were thought to be safe, to falter.” In the face of Putin's “military confrontation,” he said, it was necessary to build “a new common European security architecture for the future.” “Without question, the German government—we all—have a responsibility to make a substantial contribution to defence capabilities within the framework of the EU and NATO.

“Therefore, we say no to massive rearmament!” he asserted. The permanent increase in the arms budget to NATO’s 2 percent target was unacceptable, he said. This money was urgently needed for “future investments in an equitable shaping of the socio-ecological transformation.” Military security should never be bought with social insecurity.

Finally, the DGB leader made it blatantly clear that the opposition to war would come together with fierce wage battles and therefore everything must be done to keep the class struggle under control and suppressed.

He warned of the effects of inflation. Energy prices had risen to “dizzying heights” and were no longer affordable for many, he said. The “energy relief packages” adopted by the federal government were necessary but not sufficient. Major collective bargaining disputes were imminent “for over 10 million workers.” And this under conditions where everyone knows that €70 billion in dividends would be paid out to shareholders in the coming weeks.

The DGB slogan for this year’s May Day was “Shaping the future together!” However, this appeal for unity is not directed at workers but at the employers and the government.

The unions are responding to the growing opposition to war and to the erosion of wages and dismantling of social standards and jobs by moving closer together with the government. All the union representatives who spoke at the more than 400 rallies across the country invoked the close alliance with the government and the intensive partnership with the employers and their organisations.

The unions are an inseparable part of the war coalition. They spread the mendacious war propaganda of the government and the media, which places responsibility for the war exclusively on Putin and holds the Russian people hostage for it. The well paid bureaucrats in the trade union headquarters refuse to oppose Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine even on a principled left-wing basis, which is also directed against NATO, the main warmonger.

The building of independent rank-and-file action committees now acquires great significance in linking the growing resistance in the working class against social attacks,

against the policy of deliberate mass infection and against the danger of a Third World War and to launch a global counteroffensive.

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