

Labor in Focus by Rainer Apel

More than a local strike

Will the German metalworkers' strike mount into a political destabilization?

On May 14, German metalworkers began their strike for a 35-hour work week with a local strike. The strike, which involves only 13,000 workers in the North Baden area, has a maximum effect on the entire German automobile industry, because it is there that most of the key parts are produced. The Mahle Company in Stuttgart, for example, produces 90% of all pistons used in the fabrication of car motors in Germany. Since most auto companies can't afford large reserve stockpiles of parts, the strike is expected to paralyze production within one to two weeks.

The strike hits a sector which, usually a "conjunctural motor," has seen a drastic drop of sales in the past two months. Compared to the production figures for March-April 1983, the main car producers are behind by a margin of 8-18%. And a disruption in the auto industry will hit steel, which is already on the verge of collapse.

The strike is also affecting auto production throughout Europe, because many foreign companies depend on deliveries from Germany, as do the foreign branches of German car producers. In Holland, 40 percent of all cars sold are German cars. In Sweden, the country's two main car producers, Saab and Volvo, will run out of work if Germany does not deliver fuel pumps. In Britain, a halt in delivery of German Volkswagen engines will paralyze car production at British Leyland. In Belgium, 37,500 automobile workers will be without work if their companies don't receive parts

from Germany. In Austria, the leading machine producer, Voest-Alpine, will run out of work as will the three main Finnish machine-tool producers, Valmet, Waertsila, and Ahlstrom.

The chairman of the metalworkers of the North Baden district, Eisenmann, said on TV on May 14: "We hope that the entrepreneurs will lose their nerve, because this would help us a lot in our own solidarity mobilization." The union hopes to provoke auto companies into lockouts on a mass scale, and indeed, the North Baden metal industry promptly voted 139 to 7 for a lockout starting on May 21.

This spiral of strikes and lockouts could stop work for all the 580,000 auto workers in the nation and another 900,000 in the supplier industries. The labor-industry confrontation would spill over into the whole metal sector with a total of 3.4 million workers and force the other unions into "solidarity support actions." And miscalculations can be feared, on both sides of this confrontation.

While the printers union (150,000 members) and the public-sector workers (1.2 million members) have already threatened active support strikes, the other big unions (chemical, mining, construction, railway, textile, and food workers) with approximately 2.8 million members have so far only expressed verbal solidarity. What makes this strike extra dangerous, however, is the fact that radical currents want to misuse the ferment for purposes of political destabilization.

Officials in the metal workers,

printers, and public-sector unions have made the linkage "between this strike and the general fight against austerity and the arms race," and the German Communist Party's (DKP) 800 factory councilmen in the country, though a small minority, are well-positioned in the key industries and have, furthermore, gained the ideological upper hand in the labor movement's propaganda.

Thus, when the Dutch National Labor Federation held a "general warning strike against the stationing of U.S. cruise missiles in Holland" on May 3, which involved 750,000 workers, the German National Federation of Labor (DGB) issued a statement of support. Officials at the DGB headquarters in Düsseldorf—all non-Communist members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—stated that they wished "the Dutch colleagues to be more successful in preventing the stationing . . . if they are, it may help to revive the protest in our own country." The open alliance with the DKP and the "peace movement" struck by the DGB and SPD at the Easter March weekend of protest against the Euro-missiles (see Report from Bonn, May 8) indicates that a broader confrontation is building in West Germany.

That could develop into a labor-government confrontation. Provocative statements such as the one issued by the Bonn economics ministry, which threatened to answer a mass strike with an anti-strike law modeled on the British example, will pour more fuel on the fire.

If irrationality wins the upper hand among labor, industry, and government, a lot of already shaky companies will collapse, and unemployment will reach dramatic new records. How will the unstable coalition government of Chancellor Kohl, who invested all his political prestige in the "economic upswing," survive?