

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Labor scares East German Communists

The current protest wave signals more to come, as unrest is building in factories.

A political transformation process has begun in East Germany. An exodus of 50,000 refugees to the West in the four weeks before the SED regime's 40th anniversary on Oct. 7, a building mass protest movement taking to the streets of the big cities, and growing unrest among factory workers are the handwriting on the wall for the regime and its masters in Moscow.

Gorbachov's visit to East Germany and his talks with the SED Politburo Oct. 6-7 stressed one crucial point: The Soviet Union and its military machine depend on the functioning of the East German workforce. The industrial labor potential of East Germany is strategic for the Kremlin; the need to keep it under control is, after all, one of the main reasons why 20 Red Army divisions are stationed on East German territory.

This is also why Gorbachov harped on upgrading economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and East Germany and applying scientific innovations to high-technology production sectors. While the Western media seemed not to notice, Gorbachov made a point of this in an interview with Soviet television Oct. 7 after meeting with the SED party Politburo.

So, behind the 40th anniversary glamor, the posture of martial law, the presence of riot police, paramilitary *Kampfgruppen* militia, and regular NVA army units all over East Germany during the week of Oct. 1-7, the police intervention against protest marches in 123 cities and arrest of far more than 1,000 protesters, something else was afoot. The SED leadership convened for a series of emergency crisis sessions.

News about rapidly growing unrest among workers was reviewed. The party membership status review, which had all 2.3 million SED party members report on their political views and activities these weeks, provided the evidence of deep discontent. Signals mainly from the heavily industrialized south, from cities like Dresden, Leipzig, Erfurt, and Chemnitz, are truly alarming. The SED's "espionage" apparatus in the factories has gathered intelligence on a threatening strike potential. Targeted strikes in the industrial south could have a crippling impact on the much-hated SED party regime.

The party is caught between a rock and a hard place: Gorbachov's reminder on the strategic role of the East German industry for the Soviet military modernization from one side, the strike potential from the other. Especially because of the upgraded emphasis on the military sector and the collapse of investments and supplies in the civilian sectors, the economy has entered a critical state.

About 10 of the 12 million East German workers are experiencing a rapid erosion of living standards, while a social upper caste of 2 million East Germans has privileges over the rest, because they happen to be part of the administration, the military-security apparatus, and the military sector of industry.

The widespread hatred of the regime, and the pressure on the military and civilian sectors of the economy, all come together in the southern regions of East Germany, where the heavy industry is concentrated. This is why there is massive support for the thousands of youth who have taken to

the streets in Leipzig, Dresden, Chemnitz, Halle, Erfurt, Jena, and Plauen. This is why the traditional Monday night mass at the St. Nicholas Church (Lutheran) in Leipzig has developed, over the past four weeks, into a starting point for mass protest marches: first 5,000 participating, then 12,000, then 25,000, and on Oct. 9, some 70,000.

The protest march of 70,000 in Leipzig, which ended without police intervention, represented a certain turning point for the opposition in East Germany. Consulting with the district party committees of Leipzig, the party heads in East Berlin decided not to have the security forces crack down on the protest march, as they did over the weekend Oct. 6-8, when over 1,000 protesters were arrested in simultaneous police operations in 12 cities. Using the churches as arbiters, the regime made an offer for "dialogue" with the opposition in Leipzig and in Dresden.

But there is no reason to trust in this "anti-climax" tactic. During the Leipzig march, the entire inner city district was put on a semi-emergency status, with police and *Kampfgruppen* posted massively, was a warning to the opposition not to cross certain limits. The SED insists that the "dialogue" proceed within the existing system of political control; this is to win time to defuse the potential for strike and opposition. A police intervention to crack a protest march of 70,000 would have had disastrous consequences: It would have triggered the big labor strike the party wants to avoid.

The situation is very tense, and will be for the next weeks, until the mid-November plenum of the SED party central committee. The SED wants to postpone all changes until after the next party congress in the spring of 1990. But can they?