

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### General labor strike in the East?

*The workers are upset about the SED's tactic of delaying economic and political reforms.*

Not only new and broader mass protest actions in the cities, but also a labor strike is on the agenda in East Germany. After a wave of warning strikes in October/November, the momentum for a broader strike first came to a head in early December when in the more radicalized, industrial south of the country, steps were taken in the direction of forming opposition strike committees.

Already Nov. 30/Dec. 1, several thousand workers at the potassium mines in the Magdeburg region went on warning strikes for several hours. On Dec. 4, a protest rally of several tens of thousands in Dresden was told of the existence of a local strike committee. One initiative group in the heavy-industry regions of Chemnitz and Klingenthal pressed ahead Nov. 30 with the call for a general strike on Dec. 6, but was reined in by the region's coordinating opposition committee.

The red light came from Berlin, where spokesmen of various opposition groups were preparing to enter a roundtable with the Communist SED regime, the first session of which was scheduled for Dec. 7. A strike of the scope discussed in Chemnitz and other cities was discarded as "too premature" and inopportune.

The underlying motives for the strike, concern about the worsening economy and the lack of real commitment to political reforms by the SED, waxed despite such considerations as "inopportune." By late November, it was clear that if reforms, such as the right to free association of labor and to strikes for a decent income, the right to

produce for demand and not what the Plan wanted, free access to capital and material, were delayed into early 1990, East Germany was certain to have a very rough winter, with severe food and fuel shortages.

The opposition's experience with the SED at fruitless roundtable sessions in Berlin confirmed fears that without mass protest action on the labor front, nothing would change. This was expressed in many interviews East German workers gave to Western television and radio.

The SED had hoped to play for time, avoiding substantial concessions, offering ever-new commissions to deal with every issue the opposition raised, and the like. But the SED rulers made two big mistakes, and as a matter of fact, it couldn't have avoided them, because the open flank the opposition presented before Christmas was too tempting not to be attacked by the Communists. The leaders of the various opposition groups—New Forum, Social Democrats, Democracy Now, Democratic Beginning—decided, in an unsavory conspiracy of mutual interest, to "cool off the emotions" for German unity which showed a record high when West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl addressed a crowd of tens of thousands in Dresden Dec. 19. They decided not to have such mass events between Dec. 25 and Jan. 8.

The freeze on the opposition's mass-protest muscle was the SED's chance to attack. Using its firm grip on the media, it launched a broad attack on the opposition under the pretext of fighting "neo-fascist" sentiments. On New Year's weekend, sev-

eral monuments and cemeteries of the Red Army in East Germany were smeared with primitive anti-Soviet slogans, and on Jan. 3, the SED held an instant mass rally of about 100,000 followers and staunch party members displaying hate slogans against the opposition.

News from Romania, where the Securitate forces of dictator Ceausescu caused a bloodbath among peaceful protesters, coupled with new revelations that select, and likely armed sections of the SED's own state security apparatus still existed, made the protest ferment in East Germany boil over a few days before the end of the "freeze" on mass events.

Apart from the rally of 200,000 in Leipzig and protest actions in numerous other cities on Jan. 8, a three-hour strike of 800 workers at the prestigious, military-related Vehicles and Arms Combine in Suhl on Jan. 8 were a sign of more to come. The next day, a rally of several thousand unionists in Halle culminated in calls for a countrywide one-day strike on Jan. 23. More work stoppages were reported all over the country on Jan. 9 and 10.

On Jan. 11, 600 workers at a dairy and 3,000 construction workers went on a warning strike in East Berlin. In Erfurt, a strike of several thousand building trades and other workers occurred the same day. On Jan. 12, several thousand cab drivers interrupted their work, driving in a motorcade of noisy protest to the parliament building.

An interview Jan. 10 on the West German Deutschlandfunk radio station with Wolfgang Sieber, the director of the Dresden district council who quit the SED that day, revealed that the labor situation is heating up. "Threats with strikes have been placed on my table daily, and so far, I've been able to prevent it," said Sieber, "but this can't work forever."