

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

How fast will German labor learn?

The base of the labor movement is in a fighting mood, but the leadership is jumping into bed with the Greens.

For the first time in 25 years, Germany in early October saw a wave of plant-based industrial strikes, sparked on the local level, rather than by the trade union federations. The strikes were against a new law, which went into effect Oct. 1 and reduces sick leave pay by 20%. Staged against managers' plans to break existing wage contracts and cut sick leave pay instantly, the strikes were quite successful. One week of warning strikes in selected big firms of the metal industry, which mobilized up to 150,000 workers each day for several hours of walk-outs and protest marches, delivered an unmistakable message to government and industry leaders, not to touch existing contracts.

The strike actions mainly hit the automotive industry, which tried to implement such wage cuts by decree. "Wildcat" strike ferment mobilized up to 150,000 workers at Daimler-Benz and Opel each day of the protest campaign, halting the entire production process in some of the plants. The net loss from these few days of strikes to Daimler-Benz alone was DM 220-240 million (\$145-158 million)—which is much worse for the management than the DM 100 million they intended to "save" every year, by the cuts in the sick leave pay. The managements of Daimler-Benz and Opel, over the second weekend in October, signalled to the metal workers union that the wage-cutting plans have been called off, for the time being. Also, the government in Bonn, which had provoked this situation with its new labor law that called for these cuts, all of a sudden declared

that it had "never intended" to break existing contracts, that the industry managers had simply "misunderstood" the character of the new legislation, and that the government did not want "greater social tensions to be provoked."

The metal workers union and the national DGB labor federation responded to those signs of concession and retreat, by calling off bigger protest actions that were planned for the rest of the month, and paving the way for new talks among unions, government, and industry. Because the government is not willing to drop its budget-cutting policy, however, it is very doubtful that these new talks can result in anything positive. It is more likely that the labor unions will get bullied into new concessions, at the expense of labor's genuine interests in maintaining the present standards of living. Renewed frustration at these useless talks, and renewed labor protests in the near future are the likely outcome.

The main question now is not whether the wildcat strikes will continue, or whether they will spread; they have already spread to the chemical sector: 14,000 workers staged a spontaneous walk-out from the BASF plant in Ludwigshafen on Oct. 9. They spent their lunch break outside the plant (as they put it), marching through the city for 45 minutes, so that all traffic in the downtown area was blocked. Also, on Oct. 10, the two labor unions in the banking sector, HBV and DAG, announced a strike vote for early November.

The main question which German

labor is faced with now, is whether it can put forward new economic concepts fast enough, to be in a position to effect a change in government policy—away from the monetarist, budget-cutting line, and toward a pro-investment policy that would benefit productive industry and the labor market. In order to do so, labor first has to get rid of the ecologists that have penetrated the labor movement in the last 15 years. It is worth noting that the labor movement's traditionalist current has become more active recently, and more aggressive in taking on the ecologists. The most spectacular event of the recent period was a protest march of 6,000 chemical workers in Düsseldorf on Sept. 19, against plans of the Green party to ban production of PVC by a new law. This kind of labor anti-greenie protest had not occurred in Germany in almost 15 years.

But what also has never occurred in Germany before, is that the national chairman of a labor union addressed a Green party congress: Herbert Mai, of the public sector workers' union, Germany's second-largest, spoke to a strategy congress of the Greens in Hanover on Oct. 12, and he endorsed the formation of a "red-green" coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Greens, after the 1998 national elections. After all the bad experience labor has had with such "red-green" governments, and the situation in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which those 6,000 chemical workers protested against, such a statement by Mai should not have been made. But even worse: Dieter Schulte, the national chairman of the German federation of labor, DGB, is scheduled to keynote the national Green party convention in late November. The labor bureaucracy cannot be trusted. For the time being, the labor rank and file has to defend its interests on its own, as the metal workers did in early October.