

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

How foolish can you get?

A sign of the times: The railway workers union passed a "green" resolution against maglev development.

Something has changed in the usually rather quiet Germany: There are labor strikes and protests every day, covering all branches of industry and all layers of society. On Dec. 3, for example, several tens of thousands of employees of health care services, hospitals, and other medical institutions took to the streets in protest against the government's plans for "reform" of health care—the German equivalent of the U.S. managed health care policy. In Berlin on Dec. 2, more than 5,000 workers and employees of the public service sector marched against the government's recently passed law which is decreeing cuts of 20% in sick pay.

The last week of November saw the beginning of an unlimited strike in a branch of industry that is traditionally characterized by its "harmonious" labor relations—the producers of candy, cookies, and other sweets. All the big names of that branch, such as Schwartau, Lindt, Ritter, Stollwerck, which employs 53,000 workers and produces 20 billion deutschemarks (about \$13.2 billion) worth of sweets every year, were hit by a strike demanding the re-institution of full sick pay, just as the industry's crucial Christmas season approaches.

The union of the food-processing workers, NGG, which organized this strike, is one of the smaller labor unions in Germany, and the fact that it was chosen to send up the barrage balloon against the new sick pay law, says a lot about how the German labor union bureaucracy works. Strikes by smaller unions cost less in strike sup-

port payments, than actions by the big unions. It is the big unions, such as the metal workers with 2.8 million members, and the public sector workers with 2.3 million members, that should have launched the strike.

There certainly are legal reasons for this restraint, such as strike laws which call for a cooling-off period. In the case of the metal workers, whose talks with management about sick pay collapsed at the end of November, the laws make any strike action illegal before the end of January. But on the other hand, the concentrated warning strikes in the automotive industry during the first week of October, which mobilized up to 150,000 metal workers every day, was very efficient: Management backed down and offered to leave the old 100% sick pay intact, at least until the end of the year.

The strikes in the automotive sector were of a more spontaneous character, more like wildcat strikes, which put pressure on the leaders of the IGM metal workers union. The labor bureaucrats prefer not to call for strikes, because strike support payments make them quite expensive, and because the labor leaders have invested union funds in risky financial market operations, to make some extra money. Insider trading scandals brought the career of longtime IGM Chairman Franz Steinkühler to an abrupt end, in 1993. Financial deals like these caused losses of DM 120 million to the IGM.

These financial deals are one big, dark blot against the image of the German labor movement. The other black mark is a green one: the captivity of

the labor 'crats in the web of ecologist illusions, which has become the subject of a heated debate among labor union members in recent months. There are those who insist that the unions must concentrate on the defense of industry against the destructive effects of globalization and corporate downsizing, and there are those who claim that industrial jobs are a thing of the past, and that jobs in the environmental-products sector are the wave of the future.

The former tendency won a battle in this war of ideas, at the mid-November convention of the labor federation DGB, in Dresden (see *EIR*, Nov. 15). There, the new programmatic policy platform of the DGB denounced free market neo-liberalism and globalization in strong terms. But, after that convention, the ecologists struck back.

On Nov. 24, the convention of the railway workers union in Hamburg passed a resolution opposing the project to build the first maglev train connection between Hamburg and Berlin. The resolution parroted the Green movement's language against the project as "a waste of money," "technologically immature," and "incompatible with the existing transport grid."

On Nov. 30, DGB Chairman Dieter Schulte keynoted the national Green party convention in Suhl, thanking the Greens for their "support to labor" in the fight against the German government's austerity policy. And on Dec. 1, IGM Chairman Klaus Zwickel endorsed a "pact between industry and ecologism" and called for a tax against pollution, which would make the consumption of energy and resources more expensive. That "ecology tax" is a trademark of the German Greens.

With leaders such as these, the German labor movement will not survive, as a movement of industrial workers.