

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### War on globalizers and union-bashers

*Mass layoffs of German construction workers are provoking protests and growing radicalization.*

**T**he speech that Klaus Wiese-huegel, chairman of the German construction workers union, gave on Feb. 22 before the "Frankfurt Circle," a select group of left-wing Social Democrats, made waves in the press here. And, indeed, what he said there was "unprecedentedly radical," to the extent that he took the world market speculators and globalizers head-on. He termed their system of finances "perverse," and called for a transaction tax (modelled on the proposal of Prof. James Tobin for a 0.2% tax on financial transactions) to collect revenues for the creation of new jobs.

Wiesehuegel warned that more government budget-cutting would unleash grave social conflicts and mass strikes. "This is indicated by the recent labor fights in Spain and France. But even more important, it seems to me, is the strike in South Korea, which is revealing a new self-confidence of workers," he said.

"Without the development of such self-confidence in the threshold countries, the European labor unions would only be able to engage in defensive battles. International solidarity is gaining a new, perhaps for the first time at all, a real, political meaning," Wiesehuegel said.

This is not just "radical talk," as the media portrayed it, but a reflection of a genuine political radicalization of the German labor unions, especially among the construction workers, who, with 200,000 jobs lost, had the biggest share of the dramatic increase of the nation's jobless of 500,000 in January. The IGBSE, the construction workers union, decided to escalate its protests beyond the regular, but meaningless,

roundtable chats with the government in Bonn. On Feb. 22, the IGBSE staged a march in Dresden, and instead of the 2,000 who had been expected, more than 5,000 turned out. The march brought downtown traffic to a standstill, and when the authorities brought in more riot police to contain the protest, the situation came close to a clash between workers and police. This would have been a novelty in postwar German labor conflicts.

Several hundred thousand workers have lost their jobs, which in many cases are then taken by workers—mostly foreigners, but also Germans—who work for a fraction of the average wage of a German construction worker. Bernd Honsberg, a spokesman of the IGBSE who marched in Dresden, explained to this author on Feb. 22, that what is going on in the construction branch, what the union is mobilizing against, is "the de-generation of a whole sector into a slave-holder situation."

As he said, using the term "slave-holder economy," is not at all exaggerated, but refers to cutthroat practices that attract foreign workers who are paid far below the usual dumping wage levels, and which force low wages increasingly upon German workers.

An IGBSE survey carried out last autumn in the region around Chemnitz, revealed that about 80% of the German construction workers there were employed at wages 15% below average. And the conditions of the foreign workers there, who work for 20-30% or less than what a German worker would get, "defy any attempts to even describe them," Honsberg said. His union has detected construc-

tion sites in the region of Berlin-Brandenburg, that pay workers from Poland or the Czech Republic wages of 2.50 to 3.50 deutschemarks (\$1.55-2.00) per hour, whereas pay for a regularly-employed German worker would be at least DM 15 (DM 17 in western Germany). In one case, Czech workers were paid DM 0.95 per hour. And, in some cases involving deregulated Portuguese "construction firms," the IGBSE had to step in with emergency funds, to ensure that the Portuguese workers, who had not received any pay for months, at least received some money.

Deregulation policies that have penetrated the European Union from the late 1970s on (when Margaret Thatcher took power in Britain), have created a network of corruption and crime in the EU construction sector, causing a shift from regulated contracts at decent rates, toward methods of subcontracting which encourage firms to employ workers for only three or four months a year, with the unions frozen out. Wages are visibly decreased, and standards for the employer, at least in Germany, such as paying for workers' mandatory health insurance, are violated more and more. Meanwhile, 420,000 German construction workers, one-third of the employed workforce, are without a job, and their only chance of employment, is to accept wages visibly below standard rates, close to the slave wages paid to Portuguese, Irish, English, or Polish workers—of which there are now up to 500,000 in Germany working for the most part on illegal, short-term wage contracts.

The IGBSE, which "does not fight the workers but the system," as Honsberg emphasized, plans to hold vigils in front of select construction sites, to make labor's voice heard, and to recruit the foreign workers there, to a unified campaign for increased wages.