

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Labor needs new ideas, new leaders

After the wave of political labor turmoil in March, German labor unions went back to sleep.

In recent days, representatives of the German labor unions have often referred to the new government in Britain, as supposedly improving the prospects for protecting labor interests in Europe and in Germany. Britain's Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair is viewed as "more socially minded" than his Tory predecessors, so it is widely expected that all those economic policy problems that have resulted from 18 years of Thatcherism in London, will now be overcome.

The labor movement's expectation is dangerous: First of all, it is no secret—least of all in Britain—that Blair will stray little from the path of Thatcher and Major, as far as essentials of austerity policy, monetarism, and strategies of "streamlining" (i.e., slashing) the social welfare system, are concerned. And, second, the labor unions would do well to have an alternative economic program of their own, to confront the German government's—rather than relying on Labourite Blair to tell Chancellor Helmut Kohl what to do. And, third, this new hero of the German labor movement is but a substitute for the betrayed hopes in their longtime political partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which lost all interest in industrial labor.

The SPD's "innovation congress" in Düsseldorf, on May 21, was a frantic love affair with the "information age" and service sector. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, whose Wuppertal Klima Research Institute plays a crucial role in promoting the ozone hole hoax, proclaimed: "Innovation in the past 200 years has served the increase of productivity of labor, now the em-

phasis must be on the increase of productivity of nature."

The remarks at the congress by Gerhard Schröder, from northern Germany, who has ambitions to become SPD chancellor candidate for the 1998 elections, that what impressed him most during his recent U.S. tour, were Bill Gates and Albert Gore, are revealing. The SPD leaders have already entered their personal "21st century" of virtual reality, forgetting entirely that there are still millions of industrial workers, right here, in the 20th century.

The lesson of the SPD's sell-out for German labor? There should be a strict return to classic interests of industrial labor, not nostalgic repeats of past struggles, but under late-20th-century conditions of building up a new industry with high-technology products in transportation, energy, aerospace, and construction.

The labor movement has a big problem within its own ranks: The leadership is mostly made up of ecologists, or those who at least believe that the future is the "clean" information age, while industrial production is a thing of the "dirty" past. Union leaders widely believe that millions of new jobs in so-called "ecology technology" could replace those sacrificed in industry.

Broader industrial strikes, such as those that took place among mining, construction, and steel workers in March, are disliked by the labor 'crats, because these strikes put an industrial policy back on the political agenda, which they think should no longer be there. The workers are still there, though, and they are real. The three

successive strike waves, in March, of mining, construction, and steel workers, forced the labor 'crats out of their offices and back into the streets—for a few hours.

After the strike wave, and with the help of some government concessions, German labor was put to sleep. In their effort to look "modern," prominent labor 'crats have even begun to borrow ideas from the arsenals of the neo-liberals. For example, Dieter Schulte, chairman of the German Labor Federation (DGB), surprised many unionists in mid-May, by proposing first, that the pensions for retired workers should be reduced from the present 70% to only 64% by the year 2010. Then, he joined Chancellor Kohl for an initiative entitled "Alliance for Jobs in the East," an economic smorgasbord—but not a program—which is touted as having the potential to create 100,000 new jobs per year (although the program's authors admit that even that is far from certain). Third, Schulte said that the national industrial wage rates should be deregulated, becoming regionally or even more locally set, to create "more flexibility" for employers, which he said would also create more jobs.

He sounded so much like a hardcore neo-liberal, that many unionists, even officials over at DGB headquarters, were embarrassed by Schulte's pronouncements. Many recall that Schulte was the first labor leader to keynote a convention of the ecologist Green Party, at the end of last November. Granted, more union members are enraged at what Schulte said in the last few days. But the time has come now, to look for a new leadership for an awakened labor movement. German labor has arrived at the point where the AFL-CIO stood, when it elected a new leadership two years ago. It seems German labor must do the same, to be reactivated.