

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Labor's battle with the 'pyromaniacs'

The new program of the trade union federation looks promising, although some "green" spots remain.

While the 550 delegates to the convention of the DGB, the German labor federation, were streaming into Dresden to debate their new policy platform, the media and politicians were showing quite some nervousness. It has become evident that an increasing number of union members is no longer willing to leave unanswered the continued attacks on living standards and social programs on the part of the banks, numerous business managers, and the government.

Many labor unionists have come to the conclusion that the DGB can no longer appeal to a "consensus" with the management that no longer exists; rather, it has to clearly address the fact that there is a fundamental conflict between those who want to keep the social welfare state intact, and those who want to dismantle it.

The new DGB policy platform, replacing one dating from 1981, reflects the belief that labor must become much more aggressive, to be able to defend its genuine interests against the budget-cutters.

After a fierce three-day debate among the two main currents at the DGB convention (the "pro-consensus" faction and the "confrontationists"), the majority of delegates adopted the new platform on Nov. 16. It was not an overwhelming majority, but it was enough to ensure that "combat in defense of the social welfare state" was officially written into the new DGB platform. The most important passage of the new document is the following:

"The socially regulated market economy [model] represents a great

historic advantage, against an unbridled capitalism. The social market economy has caused a high standard of material wealth. But also the social market economy has neither prevented mass unemployment, nor the waste of resources; nor has it constituted social justice.

"The present democratic and social order of the state is the result of decades of societal and political conflicts. But it is neither stable nor guaranteed to last for all time. The end of inner-systemic competition is systematically being utilized by representatives of capital and of a neo-liberal [free market] policy, to drive back many of the social, co-determination, and wage bargaining achievements that constitute the societal quality of a regulated market economy."

The mood at the DGB convention was reflected in the keynote address on Nov. 13, by federation chairman Dieter Schulte. He told the delegates that the labor unions have a crucial role to play, in the defense of the welfare state and the social system against the free market budget-cutters in government and industry.

Schulte said that the labor movement is committed to block those who are "on the march toward an unbridled free market economy and an authoritarian, anti-social republic." The labor unions, he said, "are faced with fierce confrontations" with the "pyromaniacs" who want to set the welfare system on fire.

"We can fight; that is what we have demonstrated to the pyromaniacs. If reason does not return to the camp of the entrepreneurs, this winter will be a

very cold one, in the factories and offices."

DGB Vice Chairwoman Ursula Engelen-Kefer used harsh words in her interventions into the debate. She mocked those politicians who do not understand economic reality, but want to bash labor, as "neo-liberal *Zeitgeist* surfers."

She also denounced the neo-conservative ideologues who are convinced that, with their "sacred Three Kings of the *Zeitgeist*: individualization, flexibilization, globalization," they possess a magic weapon against labor. But labor resistance against that neo-conservative assault is real, and it is possible to win this battle, she said.

Engelen-Kefer belongs to the DGB faction that is usually portrayed as "radicals" by the government and the mass media, because she minces no words in her frequent attacks on the government's austerity policies. For example, in a statement issued Oct. 29, she charged Finance Minister Theo Waigel and the present government with repeating the mistakes of the budget-cutters who ruined the first German republic in the early 1930s. Waigel is about to act, she warned, "the way it was done during the world economic Depression, at the height of mass unemployment."

Labor is definitely being revitalized. But one big weak spot remains in the organizing work of the labor unions, namely the fact that their leaders (including Engelen-Kefer) have so far proven unwilling to also attack the one aspect of *Zeitgeist* that has infected the German labor movement: ecologism. Many unionists interpret ecologism as another way of going against "big industry," which prevents labor from looking for reasonable managers to work with, in the defense of, especially, aerospace and other high-tech sectors of industry, against the budget-cutters.