

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Can labor stop deindustrialization?

Workers who are fighting to stop eastern Germany from being dismantled have shifted tactics.

For the fourth Tuesday in a row on Aug. 31, some of the bigger cities in the east German state of Thuringia saw well-organized "Tuesday Protest" actions. Interstate road blockades and protest rallies in front of municipal and state administration buildings were staged, all lasting only a few minutes.

This type of action by the "Alliance for Action by Workers of Concerned Industrial Plants" (or "Alliance for Action," for short) began in downtown Gera on Aug. 10. Their slogan is that it is "five minutes to midnight" (which the five-minute protests are meant to symbolize) and the last chance to stop the deindustrialization of eastern Germany, which in Thuringia has eliminated all but 25% of the industrial jobs that were there three years ago.

On Aug. 17, roads in seven cities (Erfurt, Weimar, Jena, Meiningen, Suhl, Altenburg, and Nordhausen) were blocked along the same model. Spokesmen for the initiative declared that these brief actions would become an institutionalized "Tuesday Protest." The term commemorates the historic "Monday Protests" that brought hundreds of thousands to the streets of East Germany in the autumn of 1989 and catalyzed the collapse of the communist SED regime.

In Jena, Gottfried Christmann, chairman of the local section of the national labor federation, the DGB, said at a central protest rally on Aug. 17 that "enough is enough" after the loss of roughly 78% of all industrial jobs in the state since German unification in late 1990. He said that the

example of the hunger strike of potash miners in Bischofferode in northern Thuringia, which has become a national symbol of "stubborn" labor protest, showed that only that type of resistance could turn the situation around.

The reference to Bischofferode was important, as that hunger strike, which began in early July, sparked an initiative of labor leaders at other Thuringian plants that were similarly endangered by the "privatization" policy of the Treuhand agency in Berlin, which determines the fate of the former East German state-run industries. That initiative by a handful of factory councilmen, most from plants in southern Thuringia, adopted the name "Alliance for Action" and showed that it had learned a lesson from the fact that the potash miners' hunger strike had been boxed in not only by the government, the Treuhand, and the banks, but also by the massive intervention of radical-leftist groups whose only "mission" seemed to be to create an excuse for politicians to call the strike a "provocation of crypto-communists" and to reject any discussion about the decision to close the Bischofferode mine.

When, for example, the 400 workers who remain out of the 2,200 employed as of 1990 in the Suhl Weapons Manufacturing Plant, decided to follow the Bischofferode potash miners in mid-July and occupied, their plant to force renegotiations on the Treuhand plan for the foreclosure of the site, the main plant gate was crowded by radical groups distributing propaganda for almost two weeks. Workers

would at times find it impossible to enter the plant through this "siege."

The surprise five-minute "Tuesday Protest" actions do not have that problem. The "Alliance for Action" is investing more efforts into discussions of programmatic alternatives to the Treuhand privatization strategy, and less in time-absorbing actions which have unfortunately moved programmatic discussion into the background of the strike in Bischofferode.

While the programmatic work of the "Alliance" is at an early stage, some aspects are revolutionary simply because labor protests in Germany have been watered down over the years by corrupt and disoriented union leaders to such an extent that any genuine initiative of workers represents a revolt against the union bureaucracy and is labeled as "radical" from the start.

The courage of the potash miners in Bischofferode to strike for eight weeks in defiance of their own union leaders sparked other workers, including in western Germany, to either declare solidarity with that strike or, like the founders of the "Alliance," stage protest actions and strikes themselves.

As of late August, it is an open question whether the new types of labor protests in eastern Germany will prevail against massive pressure from the union bureaucracy, whether they will spark an in-depth reform of the union movement, or whether the labor leaders in the East will resist administrative corruption and keep their minds open for programmatic debates on economic and banking policies of the type offered by organizers of the LaRouche movement in Germany. If put into practice, the 1989 "Productive Triangle" proposal by Lyndon LaRouche for a recovery of the German economy would lead to the prompt reemployment of most of those 650,000 jobs that have been lost in Thuringia since 1990.