

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### New strike wave ahead

*The winter of labor's discontent will culminate with a wave of strikes, with the government as a target.*

Since the big strike waves in autumn 1996 and spring 1997, the German labor movement has stayed relatively calm. The labor unions, traditionally strong constituencies of the Social Democrats (SPD), in 1998 grudgingly abstained from strikes and protests, many of which would have been justified by environmentalist sabotage of industrial and public-sector projects. They abstained in order not to "aggravate" SPD relations with the Green Party. Gerhard Schröder, the SPD candidate for Chancellor, made clear at a very early point of his campaign, last spring, that he wanted a "red-green" coalition between SPD and Greens, after the elections on Sept. 27. His promise to the labor unions, to get them to accept this coalition pact, was that the creation of jobs, tax breaks, and an easing of budget austerity would be on top of his agenda.

But unrest has been growing since the red-green government took office at the end of October 1998, because it soon became clear that none of the three campaign promises would be kept. The red-green coalition kept a verbal commitment to job-creation, but it has done nothing in its first 100 days of office, to significantly reduce unemployment. Since November, unemployment has increased by 600,000, reaching the level of 4.5 million at the end of January.

The tax breaks announced by the government will not go into effect before 2002, and the government is just as committed to "balanced budget" policies, as the previous "neo-liberal" government of Christian Democrats

and Free Democrats had been. From the viewpoint of the working people, no change of policy has occurred, although the government is a new one.

But in stark contrast to the previous government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Schröder's red-green coalition has created a grave, additional threat to the labor market, with its obsession with the idea of an "exit" from nuclear technology. At a time when labor is hoping for a reduction of joblessness, the government wants to eliminate 40,000 jobs in the nuclear power sector, plus 110,000 in auxiliary industries. By eliminating one-third of the nation's power-generating capacities, the government is undermining the ability of the nation's power sector in the non-nuclear branches, to defend itself against the price wars and other attacks by the globalized energy cartels. Another 200,000 jobs in the energy sector as a whole are threatened, plus auxiliary industries. All in all, the anti-nuclear plans of the government are sacrificing close to 1 million jobs in German industry.

The arrogance of Schröder's Green coalition partner, which is pursuing a self-proclaimed "mandate" to dismantle crucial sectors of industry right away, has created deep rifts between labor and the government, within a few weeks. Particularly Jürgen Trittin (Greens), Germany's new Minister of Environmental Affairs, made labor's disgust with the government boil over, when he told a meeting in Bonn with factory council leaders of the nuclear sector on Jan. 19, that he did not share their concerns

about job security; that "this is the problem of the industry, of the employed, of the labor unions."

This brutal encounter with reality has provoked the labor unions to do what they have not done in many years: seriously consider public protests in support of nuclear policy. They are thinking of a range of actions, including a protest rally on Feb. 4, at the nuclear power site at Stade, bringing in labor delegations of the energy-producing sector from all over northern Germany; and a national feeder event in Munich on Feb. 19, building to a national day of protest in Bonn, likely on March 9. These two events in particular will also bring in labor leaders from the big utilities and the auxiliary industries of the entire energy sector.

The timing of this protest is unwelcome for Chancellor Schröder, because there are wage bargaining rounds going on in three sectors of the economy at the same time: the metal-producing industry, the public sector, and the banking and insurance sector. The unions of the metal workers and the public sector workers are the two biggest in Germany, with more than 4 million members; if the banking sector union employees are added in, this comes to 5 million. Labor's demands for wage increases in the range of 4.5-6.5% run directly into conflict with the government's commitment to a balanced budget, and the public sector workers are the ones who are in direct confrontation with the government—their employer. (The nuclear power workers are also members of the public sector union.) The Chancellor should look at recent history: Supported by the rest of the labor movement, the public sector workers brought down an SPD-led government, with an all-out strike in the spring of 1974. It could happen again.