

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Toward a student-labor alliance

Protesting students and labor could become a catalyst for a profound change in economic policies.

Tax the banks, leave the taxpayer alone!" That slogan, used during joint protests of students and labor union youth in front of the Frankfurt headquarters of Deutsche Bank and Citibank on Dec. 5, signals which way the strike ferment at universities, university clinics, and research facilities may go in 1998.

Protests, which began in Giessen on Nov. 11 and spread throughout the nation, had affected 113 universities and involved up to 700,000 students by early December. The strikes will build toward a national march in Bonn on Dec. 18. After the Christmas-New Year recess, strike leaders hope to resume protests, also with new forms of action.

This strike wave has not only mobilized more students than the strike leaders had originally expected, but it has also received wide public support (about 72% of the population), which indicates that there is broad discontent with the current political and social situation. The students' strike has become a national rallying point for the hopes of all who are victims of the neoliberal budget-cutting policies of the government. In that way, the situation resembles France during the national strikes of medical students some months ago, when a population enraged at budget cuts sympathized with the students, in a situation otherwise characterized by calm on the labor front.

What triggered the German student strikes was the government plan to pass a new university law, which introduces more radical cost-benefit calculations of university and research budgets, more deregulation, and more

downsizing of whatever bureaucrats may view as "superfluous" capacities. This law is designed to impose more utilitarianism on the system of university studies. The law will create conditions that work to the benefit of career-oriented students who only learn what they believe they "need" for their future job, and leave university for a well-paying job as soon as possible. Those who want to learn more or engage in long-term research, will be penalized by having to pay extra fees.

Not only will the length of study be reduced by the new law, but the impulse to deal with fundamental challenges of science, to study problems without looking at the immediate benefits, will be undermined. The trademark of German science, the Classical Humboldt system of higher education, as designed by the great reformer and humanist-republican Wilhelm von Humboldt, early last century, to provide the best education for the whole population, will come to an end. "The Humboldt university is dead," Research and Education Minister Jürgen Rüttgers proclaimed a few weeks ago.

Many of the student protests developed spontaneously, which has led many observers to attack the protests as "not really political," or "too cozy." Granted. But, it is also true that this is the first big protest many German youth have taken an active part in. And, those who have more direct experience with political activities, such as labor, are standing in the background. Why the German labor movement is leaving it to inexperienced youth to bear the standard of protest against Bonn's budget-cutting policy,

is one of the mysteries of the present situation.

This has to do with the fact that the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) is relying on a seemingly sly tactic to paralyze the government between now and the next elections for national parliament, in September 1998. The SPD has not even nominated a challenger to incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl, but wants to wait until next spring.

The students do not have time to wait, if they want to keep up the momentum. A national congress of student leaders will convene in Berlin in mid-January, to discuss how to broaden the protests. Prominent on the agenda, will be the call to close loopholes in the tax system, which so far have allowed banks and big enterprises to evade taxes, on the pretext that globalized entities cannot be responsible for "just one" country.

The strike has to become more political, student leaders whom this author talked to, have pointed out: more political, in terms of going beyond specific university issues, and addressing the general economic policies of the government, the collapse of the social safety net, and the catastrophic employment situation. The labor market is on the agenda, because many students have to work, to continue their studies.

The chances of getting a paying job have shrunk drastically, because many citizens who cannot get a decent job are competing with students for part-time work. If more jobs are not created, the situation will become hopeless. That is why the students want to begin talks with the labor unions about joint campaigns against the government's inaction on the unemployment front. A student-labor alliance, with the right programmatic input, could become a catalyst for a shift in economic policies.