

'The lowest part of the working class': refugee struggles and the trade unions in Germany

By Oskar Fischer

More than one million refugees came to Germany in 2015, the majority fleeing from Syria's civil war and others coming from the Balkan states, Afghanistan, Iraq and northern Africa. How should the trade unions respond to the 'refugee crisis' amidst a swing to the right in the public debate?

The current debate in Germany

The public debate is mainly concerned with the so-called 'refugee crisis', an expression which suggests that refugees are to blame for the economic crisis and the rising social inequality in Germany and Europe. The 'Iron Chancellor' Angela Merkel has now come under serious attack, from the right wing within her own government coalition, although she is herself responsible for tightening the asylum laws. The Federal Ministry of the Interior reports that fewer than half of asylum seekers have been awarded political asylum (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2016).

Pegida, a right wing political movement whose name translates as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the West, has organised weekly rallies all over Germany for more than a year. Among other things, they call for Germany's borders to be closed and for asylum seekers to be deported. Meanwhile, a wave of right-wing terror swept across Germany last year, involving hundreds of arson attacks against refugee facilities and countless assaults on migrants.

The new Anti-Euro right wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), transfers Pegida's demands into the legislative arena. AfD is not yet represented in the German federal parliament but it does have seats in several state parliaments, and currently stands at around 10 percent in federal polls.

The debate about refugees takes place after a decade of working class losses, starting with the Hartz IV acts in 2003 that slashed unemployment benefits and continuing with precarisation including a huge increase in subcontracted labour. Consequently many people fear social cuts and losing their pensions.

Refugee demands towards trade unions

After the suicide of an Iranian refugee in 2012, refugees founded many protest groups all over Germany, starting in Würzburg, Bavaria. They were demanding the right to stay and the abolition of restrictions against their personal freedom. After a year of activities such as occupations and hunger strikes, a group of self-designated 'Non-Citizens' occupied the Munich building of the Bavarian district of the Confederation of German Trade Unions (German: Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB), and declared:

... believing that our struggle is a class struggle, [we] started our strike in the DGB building. Based on our common understanding of class struggle, we expect the DGB to insure [sic] our security in order to continue our

peaceful protest. Otherwise, out[side] of these doors, brutal police oppression is waiting for us. We striking Non-Citizens (asylum-seekers) demand: 1. Acceptance of our asylum application without any condition. 2. Stop deportation. 3. Abolish 'Residenzpflicht' [duty to stay in a certain district, O.F.] 4. Close all asylum camps (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2013).

During their stay in the DGB building, the refugees also demanded to become union members.

Their declaration reflected ongoing discussions among the self-organised refugees around whether they are excluded from society (an autonomous or post-structural approach) or the 'lowest part of the working class' (a Marxist approach) (Fischer, 2014). After one week, the occupation ended with a compromise and no concrete outcomes, but the debate was started.

About a year later, the self organised group Refugee Struggle for Freedom occupied the DGB's Berlin-Brandenburg building, where they demanded political support for their right to work and live in Germany, to meet with political and trade union actors who are responsible for refugee issues, and the right to become union members with full legal support. They declared solidarity with precarious workers such as the strikers at Amazon (Refugee Struggle for Freedom, 2014). However, after one week of unsuccessful negotiations, the DGB Berlin-Brandenburg unrolled a banner: 'Helping refugees? Yes. Occupying our house? No.' and called the police to evict the refugees by force.

Labour groups all over Germany protested against the DGB Berlin-Brandenburg's decision with statements like 'Not in our name – refugees welcome' (LabourNet Germany, 2014) and small protest activities. The youth organisation of ver.di, a services union affiliated to the DGB, initiated a campaign for refugees' rights to join the union.

The common interest of refugee and non-refugee workers

The trade union ver.di has about two million members and is the second largest union in Germany. It organises many different service workers, from educators to postal workers, and many precarious jobs are in the service sector. In September 2015, the federal congress of ver.di, which takes place every four years, recommended that ver.di membership should be open to refugees, thus legalising the membership of 300 refugees who had already unofficially become members of the union in Hamburg in 2013. The union's regional branch of Hamburg supported the refugee

group Lampedusa in Hamburg in their demands for housing, the right to work legally, education, medical and social care, and freedom of residence within the EU (Libyan refugees, 2013). This locally limited and symbolic praxis was very controversial within ver.di, but eventually a resolution at the ver.di congress in 2015 declared that:

Numerous struggles of refugees are also labour struggles and must be recognized as such. Thus, they are about the common interest for better working conditions. Refugees fight against the radical exploitation under illegalized conditions ... ver.di actively campaigns on a political level against discrimination on the job market and for the implementation of basic workers' rights for migrants. Restrictions concerning the access to professional training and to employment must be abolished (ver.di, 2015).

The 'Common interest' is well illustrated by the current debate about the minimum wage and refugees. Established in January 2015, the federal Minimum Wage Act guarantees a wage of €8.50 for every employee in Germany, but it is undermined by precarious internships. The world's biggest mail provider, Deutsche Post AG, uses this loophole in the law by dismissing regular employees and simultaneously hiring refugees as interns. A member of the works council at Deutsche Post commented in an interview that in his branch, as far as his experience is concerned, hiring 'cheap' refugee interns instead of regular employees reproduces racist splits among the workers. Many dismissed German workers blame the refugees for the (potential) loss of their jobs (Deutsche Post Worker, 2015). Therefore, it is important for the unions to fight for the same wage for the same work, regardless of the workers' residence or contract status.

However, the major concern of refugees in Germany remains their uncertain residence status, as they are likely to be deported if they do not achieve official asylum status in Germany. Although this threatens their working and living conditions, refugees do not yet receive advice concerning asylum laws from their union.

The situation for refugees in Germany is getting worse. They are threatened by a rightist movement as well as by deportation, inhuman living conditions in refugee camps, and over-exploitation in undocumented work. The DGB member unions have made several pro-refugee statements, but they organise neither big rallies nor strikes in favour of refugees' right to work and stay in Germany, nor do they provide legal help regarding asylum.

A progressive answer to the enduring European crisis and the right wing mobilisations against refugees and migrants must combine economic and political demands. Who shall pay for the crisis? The only answer in favour of the whole working class is, 'Neither the refugee nor the non-refugee workers, but the capitalist class'. One million refugees in Germany – this means one million potential new employees. Most of them are likely to be precarious workers, many of them undocumented. If the

German working class confronts its own chauvinism and mobilises against deportations and for full democratic rights, then there are potentially one million more workers to fight around the common conditions of their class. Finally, combining pro-refugee demands with social demands such as a higher minimum wage for everyone, shorter working hours on full pay and an end to precarious conditions with pro-refugee demands will be the progressive answer to the far right attacks of AfD and Pegida.

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