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Unions in a Reunified Germany (June 20, 1990)

In the summer of 1990, the end of the GDR unions was already preordained. The Western negotiating partners differed in their approach to dealing with them, however. The expansion of the Western unions to the territory of the GDR would bring them new members, but these members would come with high expectations, especially with regard to rapid wage equalization.

Unions in the Two German States on the Path to Merging Carriers of Hope, but without Guarantees

A short time ago, when the date of the last FDGB¹ Congress was set for September, the end of the federation of unions in the GDR was precisely fixed. This federal congress will *de jure* establish a state of affairs that has *de facto* been the reality for quite some time. While the trade union federation is left with nothing but the administration of its own bankruptcy, the individual unions have already been making a real effort for some time to pave their way to German unity.

The first individual union that mustered the energy to do so and also set a public example was IG Metall. The two chairmen in East and West, Hartwig Bugiel and Franz Steinkühler, approached each other when everyone else still believed that the federation would be reformed. By now, other unions are trying to outdo the metalworkers, at least as far as the merger date is concerned. The “wedding dates” fall between September and the turn of the year [1990-91]. The declared goal of nearly all the unions: they want to outpace the politicians who are pursuing political unification in order to secure better starting positions. Given the pace at which, above all, conservative politicians are heading toward a unified German state, the unions will probably have no choice but to move even faster. Otherwise they’ll have to give up the starting advantage they’re hoping for.

Although the chairmen of the unions from East and West also appear in public side-by-side as partners, the merger will definitely not be a wedding of equals. The West German unions fear the legal baggage and inherited problems of the former GDR unions like the devil fears Holy Water. That’s why, as a rule, they only talk about taking on new members. Still, the unions do not want to entirely renounce the dowry from the assets of the FDGB. But first there is still need

¹ The FDGB [Free German Trade Union Federation] was the official trade union of the former GDR and the umbrella organization for 15 individual trade unions – eds.

for a thorough accounting of the available cash. So far, no one has been quite able to provide information on what the individual unions stand to inherit from the federation. That leaves quite a bit of homework to be done before the congress in September.

While the path toward unity has been pretty straight from the outset in the metal industry, the representatives of the public sector chose a roundabout way. The ÖTV (West) helped to establish a sister union in the GDR so that it would have a merger partner.² The suspicion remains that this step was not solely provoked by the existence of several unions in the public sector in the GDR. Evidently, the top echelon of the ÖTV in the Federal Republic was none too inclined toward straightforward negotiations with the boards of the existing unions on the subject of a merger.

There is no question that the West German unions will make at least quantitative gains through the mergers, whatever form they take. The level of union organization in the GDR is almost everywhere higher than in comparable areas in the Federal Republic. IG Metall, already the largest individual union in the world with 2.7 million members, will gain 1.6 million new dues-paying members in a single stroke – assuming that all of their GDR colleagues go along with the switch. An enormous army and strike force. And yet, according to the assessment made recently by Frank Steinkühler, this will simultaneously cause a weakening. Not financially, for according to IG Metall's chief treasurer, the additional expenses will pay for themselves through the new members. But the West German unions, especially one as strong and battle-tested as IG Metall, are seen by GDR workers as carriers of hope. Comparisons between incomes here and there are quickly made. And thus most of the demands are already oriented toward West German pay scales. But not all dreams will come true within the foreseeable future. That much realism is necessary. The struggle for acceptable wage agreements will definitely not get any easier. Stress tests are certainly in store for the united unions, also within their own ranks.

Source: Klaus Morgenstern, "Unions in the Two German States on the Path to Merging/Carriers of Hope, but without Guarantees" ["Gewerkschaften beider deutschen Staaten auf dem Wege zum Zusammenschluß/Hoffnungsträger, aber nicht mit Garantie"] *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1990.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

² The ÖTV (Public Services, Transport and Traffic Union) merged in 2001 with several other unions to create a new service union ver.di (United Service Union) – eds.