



The revolt of the German miners

HALIL Senturk is a miner in Germany's Ruhr coalfield. He told the *Financial Times* (10 March) why he and his workmates have been fighting job cuts in their industry.

"I was in England a few times, in Durham and Yorkshire, and saw what happened to the mining community there. We're trying to stop that happening here."

On 7 March the German government announced that it would drastically cut state subsidies and force the closure of most of the country's pits. Miners struck the same day, occupied their pits, invaded town halls, blocked motorways, and sent thousands of delegates to the capital, Bonn, where they set up a protest camp opposite the chancellery.

They besieged the Bonn headquarters of the FDP, the "liberal" or

"free-market" party which is the junior partner in Germany's governing coalition. A hundred miners dramatised their message that government policies would take the shirts off their backs by stripping to their underpants and marching through the capital. They demanded not only that the pit closures be stopped, but that [chancellor] "Kohl must go."

By 13 March the government had been forced to back down, at least partially. Its revised plan will still shut pits, but much more slowly, and the miners' union has accepted it.

Germany's unemployment, at 4.7 million, is now higher than it ever went in the 1930s, before Hitler came to power. It has increased by a million since 1995. That fact must have added urgency to the miners' action.

Their exuberant militancy, much

brasher than is usual from Germany's ponderous trade-union movement, must also have been encouraged by last year's metalworkers' strikes. In 1996 the unions organised months of big protests against the government's £30 billion budget cuts. Strikes in October, in the metal industries, forced employers to back down on plans to cut sick pay in line with new legislation.

As significant as the militancy of the miners' action is Halil Senturk's emphasis on learning from the struggles of workers in other countries, rather than upholding "German jobs" and "German industry" against them. Another miner put the same idea to the *Financial Times*: "Here we stick together. The thing that counts is that you're a miner. Whether you're Ali or Fritz doesn't matter."