

Massive mobilisations in Germany against Obama-backed TTIP trade deal

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Hundreds of thousands take to streets in Germany against Obama-backed trade deal

BERLIN — Hundreds of thousands of Germans took to the streets Saturday, in protest of pending trade deals with the United States and Canada.

The deals in question are the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the U.S. and the European Union and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) for the Canadian-EU relationship. Neither free trade agreement has been ratified yet, but popular outcry has been growing for the last few years.

The demonstrations took place in seven cities throughout Germany: Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne, Leipzig, Munich and Stuttgart. Organizers told CNBC that the official estimate is 320,000 demonstrators across Germany.

In Berlin, where discussions of trade policy are frequently overheard in cafes and most available surfaces are plastered in posters and stickers against the deals, the largest demonstration of the day took place with about 70,000 attendees, according to the organizers.

Earlier, local reports had indicated there could be as many as 80,000 in the German capital, but a heavy downpour close to the start time may have depressed turnout.

A broad coalition of organizations helped plan the event, but the stated rationale for opposing the agreements centers on the belief that such deals “primarily serve the interests of powerful economic interest groups, and thus only cement the imbalance between the common good and economic interests,” according to one organization.

Yet while the organizers talk of seeking to maintain the sanctity of democracy and rule of law, critics of the movement charge that its ranks thrive at least as much on anti-Americanism as any coherent political or economic philosophy.

‘I’m not okay with it’

Those elements were on display Saturday in Berlin as one sign accused U.S. President Barack Obama of being a murderer, and another suggested the American way of life was dominated by corporate interests.

The demonstrator behind those signs even had a half-sized Obama effigy with the words “the lies of the Peace Prize winner Mr. President Barack Obama” stuck to its forehead.

“I guess it’s a bit anti-American,” Tom Erdmann, a 33-year-old Berlin native working with a trade union, said as he looked at the Obama likeness and accompanying signs. “I’m not okay with it.”

He attended the demonstration because he is worried about private companies’ intrusion into public

services like education, he said. Erdmann added that he also understands why there may be a streak of antipathy to the U.S. for some at the march.

“Some people here are anti-American because it’s easy — they’re an easy enemy, especially right now with the election,” Erdmann said.

Event leaders emphasized several times that the movement they hoped to inspire would not be against any country, or even against global trade itself. Instead, they said, the demonstration was calling for more “fair” trading deals that distributed benefits beyond large corporations.

And it was that anti-corporate sentiment that pervaded the march. Homemade signs admonished those seeking “profits,” and images of the U.S. dollar bill were stand-ins for greed and inequality. Nearly every demonstrator queried by CNBC pointed immediately to concerns about “big companies” garnering too much power and wealth if the trade deals were enacted.

“You cannot just say all Americans are bad, but I can understand when people hate big companies,” Jonas, a 26-year-old Berlin student, said. Many like-minded demonstrators acknowledged they have friends and relatives who are employed by major multinational companies like Volkswagen, but they insisted that the benefits of a trade deal would go disproportionately to executives.

Europe’s ‘credibility at stake’

Saturday’s marches came during a key period for both potential trade deals.

Obama has said he hopes to conclude the TTIP negotiations by the end of the year, but that goal suffered a series of blows last month when French and German politicians openly questioned whether any deal was on the horizon. But the White House has indicated it won’t back down, and so it will be making a concerted push to solidify the terms of the TTIP before Obama is out of office.

In fact, there is “no legitimate plan B” for eventually crafting an agreement between the U.S. and the EU if the deal doesn’t happen this year, former U.S. Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Stefan Selig said in June.

As for CETA, the terms of the agreement were agreed to in 2014, and officials on both sides of the Atlantic are pushing to finally sign in October.

“The trade agreement between the EU and Canada is our best and most progressive trade agreement and I want it to enter into force as soon as possible,” European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said in a July statement. “It provides new opportunities for European companies, while promoting our high standards for the benefit of our citizens.”

“I have looked at the legal arguments and I have listened to heads of state or government and to national parliaments. Now it is time to deliver. The credibility of Europe’s trade policy is at stake,” he added.

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* CNBC.com. Saturday, 17 Sep 2016 | 1:25 PM ET:

<http://www.cnbc.com/2016/09/17/germans-march-against-trade-deals-with-us-and-canada-stop-ceta-tip.html>

Protests in Germany against transatlantic TTIP and CETA trade deals

Tens of thousands of people have protested in cities across Germany against a proposed transatlantic trade deal between the EU and the US.

Protesters say the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) will lower European standards on food and environmental protection, and could lead to outsourcing and job-losses.

Supporters of the deal say it promises to lower tariffs and promote growth.

The demonstrators were also protesting against a similar deal with Canada.

There were large crowds carrying flags and banners in seven German cities, including Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Frankfurt, all braving cool and wet weather.

"I want us to get rid of TTIP and for European social and environmental standards to be respected, maintained and improved," said Peter Clausing in Berlin.

Many demonstrators said the deal would lead to exploitation of people by businesses on both sides of the Atlantic.

"It will be the enterprises and banks that will have power over people worldwide", said Tobias Kuhn. "That is a no-go. People need to know that and we will protest until there's no chance of that happening anymore."

Figures representing Europe and America carry a banner in Berlin. Other slogans read "democracy instead of TTIP"

The EU and the US began negotiating the trade deal in 2013, aiming to create the world's biggest free trade market with 850 million consumers.

A new round of talks is due to start in October, and President Obama says he wants the deal to be concluded before he leaves office in January.

The objective of the proposed TTIP deal is to remove or reduce barriers to commerce between the US and the EU. Negotiators are working towards eliminating most tariffs.

But the plans face opposition in Europe from citizens as well as some governments.

The French government has strongly opposed it, with President Francois Hollande casting doubt on when the deal would be reached.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel backs TTIP, but Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel last month said the talks on TTIP had "de facto failed".

Mr Gabriel, who is the chairman of the CDU's junior coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) does support the CETA deal with Canada, which he sees as a counterweight to China's increasing economic power.

From the section Europe

* BBC, 17 September 2016:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37396796>

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