

Official march against right-wing extremism

German government demonstrates "for humanity and tolerance"

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The right to demonstrate is one of the most fundamental of democratic rights. It enables broad layers of the population to express their wishes to those who control the levers of decision-making and power. The demonstration "We are for humanity and tolerance", which took place on November 9 in Berlin, stands this relationship on its head. The leading lights of the state, political parties, trade associations, churches and the trade unions planned the demonstration ... but against whom and for what?

Even those organising the protest do not believe that the gangs of right-wing extremist thugs who hound people with different coloured skin through the streets, set fire to asylum-seekers' hostels and desecrate Jewish cemeteries would be influenced by such a demonstration. So they address themselves to the "citizens of this country", whom they call upon to display "confidence in their own civil courage and determination".

But "confidence in civil courage" is primarily demanded of those political decision-makers who marched through Berlin on Thursday. They could set a sign for tolerance by restoring the right of asylum, reversing cuts in the welfare assistance for refugees, abolishing the deportation prisons and the inhuman practices to which deportees are subjected—in short, by not only opposing xenophobic tendencies with words, but with deeds. But they would not even contemplate such measures in their dreams. Instead the worst nationalist rabble-rousers can be found among those who first endorsed the call for the demonstration.

Friedrich Merz, chairman of the Christian Democratic faction in the *Bundestag* (parliament), signed the call for the demonstration, which states: "We are for a humane and tolerant Germany open to the world, for all the people of this country to peacefully live together, regardless of

their world view, religion, culture and skin colour." The same Merz has for days been stirring up an unspeakable debate over a "German culture of leadership", which has exactly the opposite content. Edmund Stoiber, Bavarian prime minister and chairman of the Christian Social Union, is also among those who signed the call. His Interior Minister Günther Beckstein, notorious for his brutal deportation practices, meanwhile differentiates between foreigners who are "useful to us" and those who "exploit us".

The term hypocrisy can be overused, but it is certainly appropriate here.

The current demonstration brings to mind the one that took place exactly eight years ago at the same place, with a similar composition. It occurred following events in Solingen and Moelln, where two Turkish families fell victim to xenophobic arson attacks, and bore the motto "human dignity is inviolable". The then Federal President Richard von Weizsaecker, entrenched behind a wall of politicians and church dignitaries and a second wall of policemen, preached that the state apparatus should be strengthened against "the dissemination of malicious right-wing extremist slogans and radical left-wing troublemakers" and warned in the same breath of a "massive inflow" of foreigners. A few weeks later the parties in the *Bundestag* unanimously passed a constitutional amendment that practically abolished the right to asylum. The demonstration in 1992 therefore served as a moral fig leaf for measures that the right-wing extremists could only regard as a triumph for their own policy.

Things will be no different with the current demonstration. Many participants seriously want to do something to combat the right-wing extremists. But in politics the road to hell is often paved with good

intentions. One cannot stand up for humanity and tolerance without asking what are the social and political causes of inhumanity and intolerance. And these are closely bound up with the policies of those leading the November 9 demonstration.

This applies not only to politicians like Merz and Stoiber, who openly encourage tendencies quite hostile to foreigners, but also to Social Democratic Party leader and Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and his Economics Minister Hans Eichel, who also supported the call for the demonstration. Their pro-big business politics is dividing society ever more sharply into rich and poor, producing a lack of prospects and despair and creating fertile ground on which the far right can flourish.

The social crisis must not necessarily strengthen the right wing, however. On the eve of the last Berlin demonstration, we wrote: "Fascism, as the lessons of the Weimar Republic show, wins support among indigent layers if the working class proves unable to show them a way out of the social crisis. If the fight against powerful economic interests, which determine the fate of millions, is blocked by the passivity of the working class and its organisations, the popularity increases of those who answer the question 'what should be done to make everything better?' saying 'above all, trample on those who are at the very bottom'."

It is no different today. An effective fight against the right wing requires a progressive response to the social crisis. A prerequisite for this is a relentless struggle against the prevailing politics. Thursday's demonstration was aimed at suppressing such a struggle.

Apart from Paul Spiegel, the chairman of the Central Jewish Council, the only other speaker at the demonstration was the highest representative of the German state, Federal President Johannes Rau. Political parties were not be allowed to speak. Political organisations were forbidden from setting up book tables and information stands, and an army of policemen was present to uphold this prohibition.

The demonstration was sponsored by a broad alliance—from Stoiber and the Christian Democratic Union chairperson Angela Merkel to Chancellor Schroeder, representatives of big business such as Dieter Hundt, Hans-Peter Stihl and Olaf Henkel, the chairman of the German Trade Union Association DGB Dieter Schulte and various bishops, up to Gabriele Zimmer and Gregor Gysi of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS—the successor organisation to the Stalinist state party in former East Germany).

In many respects it mirrored the policies of Chancellor Schroeder, who in view of the increasing gap between official politics and the general population relies increasingly on a corporatist model, on the closer cooperation between the big business association, trade unions and other parties. The initiative for the demonstration came from Schroeder's circle. The main organiser of the demonstration was Kajo Wasserhoevel, who organised Schroeder's election campaign in 1998 and is now office chief for the SPD general secretary.

It is already the height of the cynicism when this alliance calls upon the population to display "confidence in civil courage", while the same politicians, big business representatives and union officials are doing everything in order to clamp down on any stirrings from below and suffocate each courageous stand against the social crisis—and thus leave the field open for the right-wing demagogues.

The only answer that those organising the demonstration have to the growth of the brown pest is to strengthen the state apparatus. This springs from an understanding of their own isolation. In the meantime, almost all parties have agreed on a prohibition of the neo-Nazi German National Party (NPD), although they all know that such a ban can neither eliminate the causes of the right-wing violence nor substantially limit it. But it creates a precedent for the defence of the political monopoly of the major capitalist parties against unpleasant competition. In the future it can be used to suppress all those, including the left, who oppose the present state of society. Already the action against the NPD is being used to rehabilitate the secret service.



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