German SPD politician warns Turkish immigrants: learn German or face deportation

Elizabeth Zimmermann
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On April 9, the daily newspaper *Rheinische Post* carried the headline: “North Rhine-Westphalia wants to change the laws concerning foreigners: SPD warns the Turks—learn German or get less money.” In the same issue, Friedrich Behrens, a member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Interior Minister for the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, complained that some Turkish immigrants were making insufficient efforts to integrate.

Behrens claimed that Turks were increasingly isolating themselves and lacked knowledge of the German language. He declared: “It must be made compulsory for Turks to learn German. One should think about using cuts in social support, for example housing benefits, as a means of exerting pressure.” In the worst cases, he stated, those who did not want to learn German should be deported.

Compulsory participation in German language courses is part of a broader plan being prepared by Behrens and fellow SPD member Harald Schartau, the North Rhine-Westphalian Labour Minister, to change the laws applying to foreigners. Previously Schartau was a regional leader of the steelworkers union IG-Metall. On April 24, the North-Rhine Westphalian fraction of the SPD debated whether to pass the draft onto the federal government in Berlin.

Behrens and Schartau insist that immigration policy should be based on whether immigrants are needed economically. According to press reports, the draft legislation aims to restrict and exclude, rather than integrate, immigrants as well as those planning to come to Germany.

The draft includes tougher regulations for immigrants and faster court hearings to determine political asylum. Although the right to asylum would be upheld on paper, in practice it would be restricted further.

Barbara John from the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has made similar calls. She claimed that 42 percent of the 127,000 Turks living in Berlin are unemployed, that only a few speak adequate German and many only speak Turkish with their children. She complained that many regularly send financial support to their relatives in Turkey. Given the desperate economic situation in Turkey and the lack of a national insurance system, such remittances are an essential form of solidarity.

Officials responsible for immigrants and the Turkish embassy have protested that the 2.4 million Turks living in Germany contribute to its economic growth and assist social integration in other ways.

German officials constantly demand “the will to integrate” from immigrants but make no effort to support integration. There are insufficient German-language courses, few places in kindergartens and day nurseries, and hardly any services to assist immigrants and their children in schools or in dealing with the authorities.

Faruk Sen, head of the Centre of Turkish Studies in Essen, said attempts by the state and the city to integrate Turks living in Berlin were inadequate. Regarding the high levels of unemployment, he said: “For somebody who is 50 years old it is hard [to get a job] regardless of whether he speaks good German or not.” In North-Rhine Westphalia, unemployment among the Turkish population is also above average—23 percent compared to the average of 19.4 percent.

Foreign workers were initially recruited in large numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. Faced with labour shortages, the big German companies organised systematic recruitment campaigns—first in Italy, later in Yugoslavia and Turkey. The first recruitment agreement was signed with Ankara in 1961.

Turkish workers were recruited for the most arduous forms of shift work in the car, steel and mining industries, making regular participation in German language courses almost impossible.

Governments did not provide decent language courses and other integration measures. The authorities proceeded from the assumption that immigrant workers would only stay for a fixed time and that real integration was not desirable.

Initially work permits and the right to residence were

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limited to two years. But the period was extended, mainly due to pressure from German businessmen who realised that it made no sense, every two years, to send home trained workers only to have train new ones.

Legally, Turkish workers first received equal treatment with immigrant workers coming from European Union countries when child benefits were revised on June 1, 1963. An agreement on social security reached between Germany and Turkey on April 30, 1964 established legal rights guaranteeing Turkish workers equal treatment with German workers in other important respects.

An alteration to the German-Turkish recruitment agreement on September 30, 1964 abolished the two-year residence. It was the first step to enable Turkish workers to settle down and immigrate *de facto*.

From 1956 to 1973, 5.1 million people legally came from "recruitment states" to work in Germany, including about 866,000 workers from Turkey from 1961 to 1973. Up until 1970, most foreign workers came from Italy and Yugoslavia, but after 1972 the major source was Turkey.

In the period 1961-1973, Turkey sent the largest proportion of qualified workers. According to statistics from the Federal Institute of Labour, skilled workers made up 30 percent of the Turkish recruitment carried out in the 1970s, or about 197,000 workers—a far higher proportion than for any other "recruitment country" (*50 Jahre Bundesrepublik, 50 Jahre Einwanderung; Kapitel: Fremde Heimat—Zur Geschichte der Arbeitsmigration aus der Türkei*).

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, foreign workers were the most affected by redundancies and unemployment. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed in the steel, mining and automobile industry as well as other sectors. Jobs requiring training were rationalised, in particular, as a result of technological developments and the shifting of labour-intensive jobs to low-wage countries.

In the steel and mining industry, programs to return immigrants to their native country, agreed to by both management and trade union works committees, exerted pressure on Turkish workers to give up their jobs and their right of residence in Germany. These measures were first used openly in 1983-84 in the Duisburg steel factories of Peine Salzgitter and Mannesmann Röhrenwerke.

Under these conditions, the official attitude toward foreign workers became more aggressive. Together with more nationalist policies in the 1980s and 1990s, xenophobia and open racism intensified. If parts of the Turkish and other foreign communities are isolated today, it is connected to this hostile atmosphere.

The threats made by leading SPD and CDU politicians to force the majority of the Turkish population to learn German or leave, are reactionary and pave the way for new anti-immigrant attacks. When immigration was desired, language courses and other assistance were in short supply. But now the situation is worse because of the financial constraints at the federal, regional and communal level.

For example in Duisburg, which is run by an SPD-Green coalition and has a large Turkish population, the adult education centre has been required to cut its budget by 900,000 Marks ($US420,000) by 2002. Courses such as "German for foreigners" and other further education classes are endangered. On average, between 12,000 and 13,500 people enrol in such courses each term.

Memet Kilic, head of the federal advisory council responsible for foreigners, has reacted by demanding that German politicians learn Turkish—the most commonly spoken language in Germany after German itself. He suspects that the language debate was only initiated by the Commission on Immigration, led by CDU politician Rita Süssmuth, to deter immigrants and pave the way for other compulsory measures.

The commission, which was initiated by Germany's SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily, is to present its proposals at the beginning of July. It was created to examine Germany's growing need for qualified workers, especially in the field of information technology, but the commission's proposals apparently concentrate on the need for limits and exclusion.

Foreign workers, who currently have a limited right of residence, are to be allowed to stay permanently only under certain conditions that have yet to be made public. Even highly qualified workers will have to satisfy a complicated point system. Although the right to asylum—or what remains of it—is said to be left untouched, the number of immigrants given refuge will be considered in relation to the number "needed".

Facing growing economic problems, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has initiated campaigns against the unemployed and foreigners "lacking the will to integrate," preparing for drastic cuts in social services. These populist accusations are an attempt to stir up animosity between sections of the working class, in order to nip in the bud any combined resistance to the anti-social policies of Germany's federal and regional governments.

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