Germany: The social and political background to the Erfurt school shootings

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The social and political shockwaves from the April 26 murder of 12 teachers, two students, a secretary and a police officer by a 19-year-old student at the Gutenberg Gymnasium in Erfurt continue to be felt throughout Germany.

Many Germans had cherished the illusion that such a thing could occur only in America, a country with extremely sharp social tensions, where violent disputes were part of daily life. But Erfurt is situated in Germany, and Germany is in Europe.

This terrible event in a small German town reveals how much the country and the entire continent have changed in the course of a few years. The conditions in Erfurt, and in German schools and cities in general, are European conditions.

Ever broader social layers have to deal with worsening social conditions and their lack of input into the important decisions taken by the state and the corporate interests that dominate society, while a small elite lives a life of luxury and sets government policy. As far as their future is concerned, today's school-going generation can be certain of only one thing: it is at best uncertain.

A few years ago social democratic parties came to power in many European countries, having promised to eliminate poverty and unemployment, and prevent "American" conditions from coming to Europe. Today it is clear to all that once in power, these parties did the opposite. Governments are not ending mass unemployment; instead they are destroying the social safety net.

Below the surface, political tensions have intensified to the point where the traditional mechanisms and institutions of political rule are failing. With the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the fascist dictatorships in Germany, Italy and Spain, social conflicts were controlled within the framework of parliamentarianism—through publicly reached compromises or secret deals in parliamentary committees, by means of collective bargaining, or through "roundtable" talks. Expanding world markets and credit provided the economic basis for maintaining social peace within the national framework.

The establishment of the welfare state did not eliminate the contradictions between the ruling and working classes that had torn society apart in the first half of the last century. They were, nevertheless, cushioned. Today, under conditions of global production and a global jobs market, all of the old nationally regulated relations and mechanisms are breaking down. As class contradictions resurface, so too does racism and the danger of fascism, together with all of the other political problems, rooted in contemporary class society, that were only papered over after 1945.

In face of these dramatic changes and the oppressive demands of a global market, workers, apprentices, students and school pupils see themselves as isolated individuals—no organization or party represents their interests. One hundred years ago, mass socialist parties existed in many European countries, showing a way out of social pauperization and political and cultural oppression. They advocated a radical transformation of society as a whole, so that the working population could have the decisive political say, in order to improve social conditions for all, abolish undemocratic conditions and prevent wars.

At that time, it was above all the young people, who had their whole lives in front of them, who placed their hopes in these parties. But today? Organizations that once represented these aims only practice deception by continuing to adorn themselves with the old names, such as "socialist", "communist", or "social democratic". In reality, their policies serve only the wealthy.

Is it any wonder that under these conditions, some people, who for this or that reason feel incapable of dealing with the growing pressure and feel they are in a hopeless position, react as disoriented, disturbed and distraught individuals? Their inhuman acts can be explained only as a result and reflection of dehumanized social relations.

In the eyes of such individuals, other human beings, with all their strivings, feelings and life aims, are simply objects, at best to be ignored, at worst to be eliminated or hunted down on the streets, or driven out of the country as

unwelcome strangers.

The reaction of the establishment parties to the outbreak of lethal violence in Erfurt was to cover over the underlying social wrongs and tensions, instead of looking for means and ways of overcoming them. Apart from hypocritical expressions of sorrow, the only thing to be heard from the politicians was calls for harsher laws, stronger state censorship and more repressive police controls over what the individual can see on television or access on a computer.

It is, we are told, computer games, television programs and videos depicting cruel scenes of violence that are to blame for lethal eruptions as in Erfurt. But even if this were the case, the question remains, why? Why don't these violent videos and pictures cause revulsion and horror?

This question is never asked, because the response would touch a sore spot: war and violence as a way to "solve problems" can be seen not only on computer games and videos. They are official policy throughout Europe, regardless of the colour or nature of the governing coalition.

This is the second fundamental change that has occurred in Europe. Like the policy of mass impoverishment, the policy of violence and war has also assumed centre stage once again.

Germany's Social Democratic-Green Party coalition has stationed well over 1,200 soldiers in Afghanistan, the second largest contingent of troops, exceeded only by that of Britain. To what end? To force upon this bombed-out country a government hand-picked by Washington and its European allies.

At the same time, the German navy has taken supreme command over a colonial war fleet at Cape Horn, while at home the construction of a regular military intervention force is in full swing.

When the dispatch of snipers is praised in the media as an effective policy for ensuring a nation's strength and respect in the world, why should it be a surprise that some people, in view of the conditions under which they live, resort to the same methods to salve their damaged egos—first in virtual reality, then in the real world?

After Erfurt, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Interior Minister Otto Schily and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer led the chorus in demanding the banning of films and videos that show violent scenes. If one took this demand seriously, the first items to fall victim to the censors would have to be the news reports of their own foreign policies and that of their friends and allies.

Is it not the case that cold-blooded executions such as those carried out by a high school student in a German town are the daily business of Israeli soldiers in Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah? Are not the virtual battles in computer games against so-called "terrorists" being fought in the real world

in Afghanistan and the Middle East? Cannot their results be seen daily in the newscasts—devastated refugee camps, schools, hospitals, television stations, injured children and corpses lying about?

The juvenile murderer in Erfurt was not hardened enough; he did not have the strength to confront the results of his cruel actions, and so he extinguished his own life. But the main perpetrator of the mass murder of Palestinians is far from being morally unsettled. Instead, he enjoys cordial relations with the American and European governments. His bombing and assassination campaigns are justified in Berlin and the European Union as the legitimate and understandable policy of an honourable friend.

Why then is it "inexplicable" and "completely unusual" when a humiliated and desperate small-town high school student finds no human feelings and no moral inhibitions to prevent him from carrying out a no less terrible crime, albeit on a smaller scale? If he had been given the chance to graduate from high school, might not his skills as a member of two shooting clubs have made him welcome in the German army's special commando force, at present operating in Afghanistan?

War and militarism have returned to Germany and Europe. They ooze again from the cracks and pores of bourgeois society, as they did one hundred years ago in the Kaiser's empire and subsequently in the Weimar Republic. There was a time when the socialists in the Social Democratic Party, and later in the young Communist Party, fought to mobilize the masses against poverty, oppression and war. But today?

It would be wrong to assume that this difficult political situation will persist for a long time. A glance at France is enough to see this is not the case. The government policies of the Socialist Party, the Greens and the Communist Party enabled Le Pen's neo-fascist party to gain political weight. At the same time, however, three million voted for parties and candidates that claim to be represent a socialist, revolutionary alternative. Notwithstanding the fact that these parties are far from measuring up to their own claims, the vote they received foreshadows a reversal in the political mood of broad social layers in Europe.

It is an unambiguous sign that new possibilities are opening up to reorient the broad masses of the population with a socialist perspective: from the individualism of the "me-first" society to a revolutionary perspective of social progress for all the world's people.

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