

Bush administration abets right-wing provocation on eve of German election

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Following remarks by the German minister of justice, Herta Däubler-Gmelin, who is alleged to have compared George W. Bush with Adolf Hitler, the Bush administration responded with a sharp attack on the Social Democratic (SPD)-Green Party government, headed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Washington seized on the report of Däubler-Gmelin's remarks to join with the conservative opposition in Germany in creating an international scandal on the eve of Sunday's national elections.

The US response was a thinly veiled attempt to shift the closely contested election in favour of the Christian Social Union (CSU) candidate, Edmund Stoiber, or, should Schröder win the election, intensify American pressure on his government. Washington has increasingly sought to isolate the SPD-Green government since Schröder announced that he would not support a US military attack on Iraq.

The Bush administration's furore over Däubler-Gmelin's remarks also had a domestic component: it was designed to discredit within the American population Germany's stance of opposition to US war plans.

Däubler-Gmelin (SPD) made her controversial comments last Thursday in her election constituency of Tübingen at a meeting of 30 trade union representatives. According to a report in the local newspaper, the *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, whose reporter attended the meeting, Däubler-Gmelin said in reference to American plans for a war against Iraq: "Bush is seeking to divert from his domestic problems. This is a well-known method. Hitler had used it."

The minister later denied that she had made the remarks. For its part, the newspaper insisted that its report of the meeting was accurate, and added that Däubler-Gmelin had agreed to the publication of the article.

According to some press reports, Däubler-Gmelin emphasised at the trade union meeting that she was not comparing the persons of Bush and Hitler, but rather their political tactics.

The incident was picked up by the right-wing press in Germany to promote the election campaign charge of

Stoiber that his opponent, Schröder, was needlessly alienating Washington with his criticisms of Bush's war drive against Iraq.

Schröder sought to defuse the controversy with a personal letter to President Bush. "I would like to say how sorry I am that remarks attributed to the German justice minister may have hurt you," he wrote. "I can guarantee that anyone who draws a link between the American president and a criminal does not have a place in my government."

Although the comments by Däubler-Gmelin were made at a semi-official meeting and were immediately denied and withdrawn, the US administration and leading media organs reacted with remarkable vigour.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer described the comments as "outrageous and inexplicable". Even after Bush received Schröder's letter of apology, Fleischer said, "The president continues to view this as a troubling event."

The *Financial Times Deutschland* quoted Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, as accusing Berlin of poisoning the atmosphere between the two countries. "I will say that lately it has not been a happy period in our relations with the Germans," Rice declared. "There were things said which are completely unacceptable. The declarations of the minister of justice, even if only half of what is attributed to her is true, are quite simply inadmissible."

Jesse Helms, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, placed the blame for the alleged Hitler reference on Schröder, saying, "The German chancellor has damaged German relations with the United States in ways that cannot be easily repaired." He proposed that Congress consider withdrawing US forces from their bases in Germany if Schröder won re-election and Germany failed to join a "constructive dialogue" on Iraq.

In an interview with CNN on Saturday, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld ruled out meeting the German defence minister, Peter Struck (SPD). Rumsfeld acted as if he did not even know the name of his German colleague, who recently replaced Rudolf Scharping.

When asked if it would be helpful for the two men to meet

at the upcoming NATO conference in Warsaw, Rumsfeld replied, “The German government recently released its defence minister. Whether or not the replacement for that person will be in Warsaw, I have no idea. I certainly have no plans to meet with that person when I’m there.”

In Germany, the American criticism of the Schröder government was taken up by the conservative opposition, which hoped to exploit the issue to overcome in the final hours of the campaign what opinion polls claimed was a small lead for Schröder. In chorus, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), CSU and FDP (Free Democratic Party) demanded the immediate sacking of the justice minister. CDU Chairperson Angela Merkel declared, “There can be no further delay in this affair.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not support the foreign policy aims of the SPD-Green Party government, as we have made clear in numerous articles. The criticism of US war plans by Schröder and his foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, are made from the standpoint of the interests of German imperialism. Both men are intent on pursuing their own conception of German great power politics. Nevertheless, the conflict surrounding the remarks by Däubler-Gmelin is worthy of commentary in two respects.

First, the remarks attributed to the justice minister express an undeniable truth. Nobody who has followed developments in the US can doubt that the desperate drive towards war on the part of the government is largely bound up with domestic considerations. Growing social polarisation, exacerbated by the consequences of the stock market collapse, combined with revelations of corporate fraud and criminality, implicating leading members of the government—all of this makes war as a means of diverting public anger an urgent necessity.

In this respect, the reference to Hitler’s use of war as a distraction from social contradictions at home is entirely appropriate. Recently the WSWS drew attention to the parallels between Bush’s methods and those of the Nazis in the year 1938, when leading forces inside the Nazi regime were determined to launch a war. (*See*: “The Bush administration wants war”)

Such an analogy does not make George Bush an Adolf Hitler, or his government an equivalent of the fascist regime. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to regard any comparison between the methods of Bush and Hitler as inadmissible. This could only be the case if there existed a strict dividing line between fascist and traditional bourgeois politics, which is not the case.

Hitler’s foreign policy was a continuation, in a particularly aggressive and bellicose form, of certain traditions that already existed and were supported by large parts of the German bourgeoisie. Especially in the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, well-known bourgeois diplomats played a leading role up until the end of the war—such as Ernst von Weizsäcker, whose son, Richard von Weizsäcker, would later become president of West Germany.

The Bush administration is not a fascist regime. But with regards to its policies on the international as well as on the domestic plane, it follows an extremely right-wing course in the interests of a small, thoroughly anti-democratic financial oligarchy.

Second, the intervention of the Bush administration into the German election campaign must serve as a warning. The attempt to influence the election result at the last minute by means of a provocative campaign against the social democratic camp is thoroughly undemocratic. It is reminiscent of the methods employed by Bush to manipulate the results of the US presidential election in his own favour two years ago.

In its attempt to bring together a new coalition for its attack on Iraq, the US government is increasingly resorting to a combination of blackmail, pressure, bribery and intimidation. This behaviour has a long history in relation to oppressed nations—one only has to recall the cynical support of the US government for the feudal dictatorship in Saudi Arabia. It is, however, rather new when employed against a Western European member of NATO.

Throughout Europe, the Bush administration collaborates closely with the most right-wing forces—with the Berlusconi government in Italy, which includes Mussolini’s heirs from the National Alliance, and with the Spanish government of Jose Maria Aznar, whose People’s Party includes the heirs of the fascist Franco regime.

The commotion surrounding the remarks of the minister of justice is an expression of the enormous tension prevailing in international politics. Däubler-Gmelin’s comments, which had not been intended for public consumption, provide a glimpse of the discussions taking place behind closed doors in German government circles.

The Social Democrats and the Greens can oppose neither the threat to democratic rights nor the growing danger of war. Under the pressure of intensified inter-imperialist conflict, they themselves attack basic social and political rights and pave the way for the extreme right wing. Only a socialist movement uniting the American and European working class can effectively fight these dangers.



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