

Against political censorship and bureaucratic caprice

An open letter from the WSWS Editorial Board to the Attac movement in Berlin

The Editorial Board
26 March 2003

Dear Jan Sievers and members of Attac Berlin,

At a meeting of the Axis of Freedom organisation last Thursday (March 20, 2003) a majority vote agreed that a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board in Berlin would be allowed to address the antiwar rally planned for that Saturday (March 22, 2003). It was also agreed that the speech would take up the relevance of social issues to the question of war.

This decision is duly noted in the protocol of the meeting.

In line with this decision it was agreed at the start of the March 22 demonstration that Ulrich Rippert (representing the WSWS Editorial Board in Berlin) would address the rally as the second speaker, following a representative of “School Students Against the War” and prior to the final speaker, Green Party deputy, Hans-Christian Ströbele.

Only a few minutes before the speeches were due to begin, Carl-Friedrich Waßmuth and you, Jan Sievers, from Attac Berlin said Ulrich Rippert could not speak, and the two of you barred him from addressing the meeting. As justification for this it was stated that a leaflet containing a statement by the WSWS that was being distributed at the demonstration did not correspond to the political standpoint of Attac.

In particular, it was said that the WSWS statement’s comparison of the war currently being waged by the US against Iraq with the 1939 Nazi blitzkrieg against Poland was “irresponsible”. This, Mr. Waßmuth maintained, was “completely exaggerated”. Should that point be made at the rally, he said, it would not only harm Attac, “[I]t would also send a completely wrong signal to the United States.”

Although several members of the Axis of Freedom were present and insisted that the speech by Mr. Rippert had been democratically agreed and could not be reversed by just two or three persons, both Mr. Waßmuth and you, Mr. Sievers, insisted on imposing this ban.

The WSWS Editorial Board vigorously rejects this blatant act of political censorship and bureaucratic caprice and demands a statement from Attac Berlin regarding the completely undemocratic and unacceptable behaviour of Jan Sievers and Carl-Friedrich Waßmuth.

We pose the question: why do you reject so vehemently a reference to the invasion of Poland by the Hitler regime in September 1939—to the extent that you are prepared to contravene elementary democratic principles and traditions?

It would have been entirely possible for you to comment on this point from the speakers’ platform. Instead, you took it upon yourselves to decide what 40,000 demonstrators could or could not hear. Why, and on what basis?

Why were you not prepared to let those taking part in the demonstration make their own judgement? Thirteen years after the end of Stalinism in the German Democratic Republic, such methods of political censorship are totally unacceptable at the Brandenburg Gate.

Prominent international legal experts have not hesitated to describe the invasion being carried out by the United States and Britain in Iraq as a clear breach of international law. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) based in Geneva, for example, has stated that “a war without a mandate from the Security Council is a blatant violation of the ban on force.”

The professor for state and international law, Dietrich Murswiek (Freiburg), wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “The standpoint put forward in the press that by giving orders for an attack without a mandate from the Security Council Bush is operating in a ‘grey area’ is false. Without express sanction through a new resolution the war against Iraq is a banned war of aggression—a crime from the standpoint of international law.”

The dropping of thousands of bombs on Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, under conditions where the Iraqi Air Force has been effectively disabled, represents a criminal act of war. The American strategy of “shock and awe” is directly based on the Blitzkrieg tactic, which was developed by the German Army in the First World War, tested by the Nazis in the Spanish Civil War, and then systematically employed in the Second World War.

In response to continuing Iraqi resistance, which is not restricted to the military but also encompasses the population itself, one can expect even greater terror measures by the American and British forces.

We are not alone in making the parallel to 1939. It has also been made by the well-known American columnist Jimmy Breslin. Following Bush's speech declaring war on Iraq, Breslin published a column in the newspaper *Newsday* (March 20) in which he quoted extensively from the speech made to the German parliament by Adolf Hitler on September 1, 1939, in which Hitler announced the invasion of Poland. Breslin went on to comment: "It is darkly familiar to what we have been hearing here, when for the first time in American history we became all the things we ever hated and invaded another country."

Breslin ended his comparison with the words: "On that night, Hitler used this dry, unimaginative language to start a world war that was to kill 60 million, and they stopped counting. Last night, George Bush, after speech after speech of this same dry, flat, banal language, started a war for his country, and we can only beg the skies to keep it from spreading into another world war."

Why is it not possible to say in Berlin something that has been printed in one of the largest circulation newspapers in the US? Yet Carl-Friedrich Waßmuth said the comparison "would send a completely wrong signal to the United States."

One is forced to ask: to whom is he referring? Such a comparison will certainly not disturb the great number of opponents of the war in America. Last Saturday on the streets of New York many demonstrators took up the slogan: "Hitler, Bush, you are the same! The only difference is your name!"

The ones who are offended are sitting in the White House and the Pentagon. But why should we take notice of them?

Waßmuth's remarks only make sense when one considers the position of the German government. It is well known that it is extremely sensitive to such historical parallels. When the German justice minister, Herta Däubler-Gmelin, made an entirely appropriate comparison between Bush and Hitler, she was quickly forced to quit her post.

The German government is seeking to avoid any additional tension in its already strained relations with the Bush administration. The Social Democratic-Green Party government refused to vote in favour of a resolution for the war on the United Nations Security Council, but it is not prepared to genuinely oppose the war.

This is why the government has refused to block German airspace for the US Air Force and continues to allow the US military to operate from its bases in Germany. This is why the government has studiously avoided declaring the war to be illegal. This is why it allows German Fuchs-type tanks to operate in Kuwait, and German soldiers to patrol in AWACS reconnaissance planes in areas caught up in the war. This is why it has undertaken to relieve the burden of the US military in Afghanistan and assist in the security of US bases in Germany.

A resolution passed by the executive committee of the Green Party justifies such collaboration with the American war effort

by claiming that it is necessary "to limit foreign policy damage in the conflict with the US." Any damage to transatlantic relations and NATO—these essential pillars of German foreign policy—would, according to the Greens, "lead to a weakening of the government."

Waßmuth's argument that one cannot afford to send the wrong signal to the US can only be interpreted as support for the position of the German government. It is worth noting that Hans-Christian Ströbele, who is a member of the national executive of the Green Party, was allowed to speak, while Ulrich Rippert was banned because he supposedly threatened to "send the wrong signal" to Washington.

Of course, Waßmuth is entitled to his opinions. But he has no right to impose his opinion on a demonstration such as Saturday's, which expressly called for a ban on the use of German airspace and territory for US war activities against Iraq.

One can only interpret the ban on Rippert as an attempt to subordinate the peace movement to the interests of the German government. This would be a fatal step. The peace movement can be assured of success only if it does not permit itself to be manipulated by the government, and instead actively opposes the policies of Schröder, Fischer and company.

This requires, however, a fair and democratic exchange of opinions over the future political orientation of the peace movement without any standpoints being suppressed. Whoever employs political censorship or bureaucratic methods has no place in this movement.

We repeat: it is not here a question of a misunderstanding, organisational error or incorrect decision made under the duress of a mass demonstration. The WSWS Editorial Board representative was stricken from the speakers list on expressly political grounds. This cannot be accepted under any circumstances.

We call upon you to take a position on this matter and change your position.

Yours sincerely,

Ulrich Rippert and Peter Schwarz, on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board



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