

German teenager shoots himself at school

Dietmar Henning
23 July 2003

On July 5, a 16-year-old was buried in the Bavarian town of Coburg amid the mourning of much of the local population.

Three days earlier, Florian K. (his full name has not been released by authorities) had taken his own life in a classroom of the Coburg secondary school. During German lessons, Florian suddenly pulled a weapon and fired twice into the blackboard next to his teacher. The teacher and all of his classmates immediately fled from the classroom. The student then forced one 15-year-old classmate to remain in the room with him.

A teacher who had been marking class tests in the room next door attempted to talk to the boy to dissuade him from firing his gun again. A police spokesman reported, “During the exchange of words a shot went off.” The teacher was hit in the thigh but was able to escape from the room.

Behind the classroom’s closed door, the boy produced another weapon from his backpack and fatally shot himself in the head in front of his 15-year-old classmate. Police ruled out the possibility that he had planned a massacre, because the teen had already boasted about his guns and showed them to his classmates during the first lesson that day. He also only fired a deliberate shot against one person—himself.

As with every such event, the political establishment and the media reacted with perplexity. The ritual claims were repeated: the incident was just an individual case, impossible to foresee; it “had fallen out of the blue” and could not have been prevented under any circumstances. But this is not the case. It is a sad fact that Florian K.’s suicide in school is not just an individual event. Rather, it reflects the situation facing many youths—as well as the situation within German schools.

It is just one year since 19-year-old Robert Steinhäuser’s mass murder shook the public and raised questions about the German school system. He ran

amok in an Erfurt high school, killing 16 people—most of them teachers—before killing himself

Just before these killings took place, the international study comparing national school systems (PISA) had given the German school system the worst possible marks. The correlation between the rigid, socially stratified school system in Germany and the tragedy of Erfurt was striking.

The German school system, which is divided into three parts, systematically produces failures with its “results-orientated” culture. One third of all pupils have to repeat at least one year, are expelled from school or are even refused admittance to school. In the state of Bavaria, this figure reaches 50 percent.

Growing unemployment especially among young people, together with the ruthless policies pursued by the federal government against the poorest sections of society, contribute to failure at school. This engenders despair that can develop into anger and aggression and eventually explode into violence. The media, official politics and big business are leading an ideological campaign to suppress any sense of social solidarity, equality or compassion. In doing so they are creating an atmosphere in which many people—not only youth—perceive their own situation as completely hopeless.

With the information available at this point, it is difficult for an outsider to say exactly what precise circumstances led the youth to take his own life. The police have yet to release the results of their inquiries, but everything indicates that Florian K. was increasingly gripped by despair resulting from pressure at school.

The circumstances of his life, which still have to be officially confirmed, indicate that he was a disturbed young person. Nevertheless, there is as yet no explanation for what would drive him to suicide. Speaking at the Coburg school, Bavaria’s minister of

culture Monika Hohlmeier (CSU—Christian Social Union) reported that probably “changes took place in his surroundings” recently. She stated that he had begun to associate himself with occultism or maybe even Satanism. He listened to heavy-metal music and wore black clothing.

The background of Florian’s family, which included membership in the local the rifle club, explains where he got the two pistols. His father is an active member of the local rifle club and the 16-year-old took the guns from his father’s safe. According to the police, the grandfather of the boy is a weapons specialist and had also been a member of the rifle club.

His situation at high school was evidently at the core of his suicidal tendency. Florian belonged to that half of Bavarian pupils who are forced to repeat a grade at least once. Most of his classmates in 8th grade were two, or in some cases even three years younger. His marks had significantly declined during the last semester. In music, for example, they had fallen from 1 (the best mark in the German school system) to 6 (the worst mark). His parents had been asked to come to school to discuss his situation. School staff and local politicians stress that there was no problem with him advancing to the next class, but nevertheless the obvious indications of Florian’s disturbed behaviour were ignored.

Florian was regarded as an “inconspicuous, quiet and average pupil.” This assessment—repeated by priests, teachers and Mrs. Hohlmeier, with a shake of the head, over and over again—is an indication of the situation within the German school system. As long as a pupil is quiet, inconspicuous and conformist, everything is fine. All the pupils have to do is to regurgitate knowledge according to the curriculum and “produce results.” If they comply with these requirements, they receive good marks.

If they don’t, however, they are punished with bad marks, must repeat a year or may even be expelled from school. No attention is paid to their real feelings, needs and problems. It is only when one of the students reacts with violence that he or she is regarded as a problem.

On the same day that Florian K. killed himself, the Federal Criminal Police Office presented a study in which 12- to 14-year-old pupils were questioned about their experiences with violence. Among the answers,

two thirds of all boys reported that they had hit a classmate during the last six months. The author of this study, Friedrich Lösel, a professor of psychology, ascertained that the number of “extremely difficult pupils” is rising.

Politicians of all parties represented in German parliament are unwilling to make any changes. On the contrary, the attacks on the fabric of German society by federal and state governments are not limited to the educational system. In the meantime, the individual states have started a competition to achieve the best test scores, thereby intensifying the “pressure to produce results.” All obstacles to this goal are to be removed. What they regard as obstacles in this context are first and foremost so-called “bad” pupils.

The German school system’s principal function as an effective tool for social selection is to acquire even greater importance. More tragic events like the shooting incident in Coburg will be the inevitable consequence.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact