

Leipzig: “industrial beacon” and growing poverty

Snapshot of an east German metropolis

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Some of the biggest demonstrations against the German government’s Hartz IV social welfare cuts over the past weeks have taken place in Leipzig, a major east German city in the state of Saxony. In autumn of 1989, the city’s Nikolai Church was the assembly point for weekly protest marches against the East German Stalinist bureaucracy preceding the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and parallels have often been made to the regular Monday demonstrations now taking place.

Now, almost 15 years later, the city has changed dramatically. The city centre has been cleaned up. Scores of new businesses and office blocks are located next to the old patrician mansions, the latter dating back to the city’s founding, as well as buildings recalling the periods when Johann Sebastian Bach was cantor of the Thomas Church and when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe studied at Leipzig University. The central station has been transformed into a three-storey shopping centre, complete with fountains and a “relaxation-oasis.”

The city administration presents Leipzig as a symbol of the “economic recovery of the east.” One can read glowing recommendations in glossy brochures about the settlement of “new, trendsetting industries.” In particular, the new Porsche and BMW auto factories are celebrated as “industrial beacons.”

Just a few tram stations away from the centre of town, however, the landscape changes dramatically: dilapidated houses, shabby facades, neglected courtyards. Here, poverty and social need hit one in the face. From the number of closed and barricaded businesses, one can see how many people tried to make an independent living after the Berlin Wall, and failed.

Entire housing blocks are vacant and run down. Since the end of the Stalinist regime, 100,000 residents of working age have made their way to western Germany,

almost a fifth of the entire population. The official number of unemployed people in Leipzig is almost 20 percent. In some parts of the city, the figure easily exceeds 30 percent; and in many areas every second person under 25 years is unemployed.

Even compared to the level of unemployment in east Germany as a whole, which is almost double that of the west, the number of unemployed in Leipzig is above average. The city also has a larger proportion of social security recipients, homeless and drug addicts.

“What makes people angry here is the claim by Mr. Clement [Wolfgang Clement—the German Social Democratic Party minister for eEconomy and employment] that the government’s Hartz IV measures are necessary to force the unemployed to finally accept work. This man obviously does not comprehend that people here are desperately seeking work, but cannot find anything.”

With these words, we were greeted by Christian Lamss at his office door.

The 51-year-old is head of the Leipzig Unemployment Centre (LEZ). The LEZ is not a self-initiative office run by the unemployed themselves, but rather a professional placement and support agency. Financed by various sources, the LEZ employs a dozen advisors and offers employment advice, further education programs, computer training and debt counselling.

Christian Lamss explained the anger, outrage and often despair of many of the unemployed with whom he deals daily. “I believe that the ministry in Berlin and the chancellor’s office haven’t got a clue about what’s happening here. Many people who enter this building don’t know which way they should turn and are completely insecure. Apart from that, they feel they’ve been deceived. Not only did the government, before being

re-elected, promise more jobs and social justice, but they spelled it out concretely.

“In the past number of years, it was repeatedly emphasised that you have take care of your own life insurance and old age insurance. Not a few did this and signed up for private insurance schemes. And now? Now this government classifies such insurance policies as financial assets and demands that they must be paid out and used before you will see one cent of Unemployment Benefit II [the name given to the new unemployment payment scheme to take effect on January 1, 2005]. This is, in the deepest sense, unfair.”

Lamss reported that sometimes people would come into his office who just wanted to know if the changes were really true. They simply could not believe them. “I don’t just see the loud protests on the streets every Monday and the tears during discussions about debt advice. I also see the silent protests during personal consultations from people with dazed faces who are stunned.”

Asked whether recipients of Unemployment Benefit II could actually be forced to move out from their apartments into a smaller one, Lamss explained, “Many details about this law are not yet known, because the individual regulations on its implementation have not yet been released. And this of course means insecurity for those affected, and sometimes for the counsellors too. The fact that Minister Clement wants to enforce a law with brute force that is not only anti-social but also poorly conceived and incomplete makes the entire situation even worse.

“Definite rules have already been specified over the issue of accommodation. If I remember correctly, persons living alone will be allowed a maximum of 40 square meters, for two people 60, and so on. This can definitely mean that some will be compelled to move house. It will especially affect families that break up or partners who have already split where one still lives in a large apartment. The official administering the case will be the one who decides, but the degree of flexibility to be given for such decisions is not clear.”

On the Leipzig Monday demonstrations, Lamss explained that the organisation Action Alliance: Social Justice—Stop the Gutting of Social Services, in which he participates, had originally planned and announced a demonstration for August 30 back in June. The intention was to kick off the protests against Hartz IV. However, as details of the new law became known and provoked outrage, the Monday demonstrations began a lot earlier, as they also did in Magdeburg. “We were simply

overtaken by events,” said Lamss.

Just a few blocks away from the LEZ in the suburb of Gohlis is a soup kitchen for the homeless. Each day, between 50 and 70 homeless people are given warm food, according to the person in charge there, who also explained that he was not allowed to provide any further information. A directive from the government department prohibits any unauthorised contact with the press.

Even the head of the outreach clinic for the homeless, Four Walls, Constanze Klenk, only spoke to us after lengthy consultation with department officials. It is clear that the state administration is taking great lengths to conceal the city’s social misery. The unofficial number of homeless people is reportedly very high. The outreach clinic has between 100 and 150 people registered as permanently homeless, and the figure for the city is much higher. Many find shelter with friends or relatives or underneath trees.

The main reason for homelessness is eviction due to outstanding rent. Whether this would get even worse under Hartz IV, Klenk did not want to say. “However, it will not get any better, that much is for sure,” she admitted. “Where are the jobs supposed to come from? In reality, the 600,000 one-euro jobs will replace those positions that are today higher-paid. It’s getting continually worse.”

Klenk is sometimes astonished at the calmness that Clement displays when he stands before the cameras and makes his provocative remarks. “I think that you can only explain this on the basis that this man has absolutely no idea of the consequences of what he is doing and people’s reactions here,” she said. “There is something called human dignity, and when this is destroyed, the consequences for those affected are incalculable. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it makes one worried and anxious.”



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