

# German minister employs Nazi vocabulary to describe long-term unemployed

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Last week, a number of newspapers revealed the contents of a dossier issued by the German Economics and Labour Ministry which employs Nazi vocabulary in its diatribe against the unemployed. The pamphlet, entitled “Give priority to respectable people—against abuses, ‘rip-off merchants’ and self-service in the welfare state,” can be read on the web site of the ministry, which was previously headed by Wolfgang Clement (Social Democratic Party—SPD).

On its 33 pages can be found headings like “The welfare-state milking cow—everyday self-service at the expense of the public good,” “Assistance to commit fraud, instead of counselling: the accomplices,” “More checks against social fraud—how ‘rip-off merchants’ have fewer chances.” There are five pages on “Improving the balance sheet through fraud: how businesses and the self-employed get rich from the social insurance system.”

Every chapter is the same: containing page after page of individual cases of actual or alleged abuses of the unemployment benefit system. The tone varies from cynicism to demonstrative indignation.

The cases described, which the brochure calls “social fraud” or “rip-offs,” seem rather harmless in the cold light of day. Several things should be taken into account: anyone who has worked in a job and paid into the social security system—no matter for how long—is only entitled to one year of so-called Unemployment Pay I, which is linked to previous earnings. Thereafter, only the “needy” will receive Unemployment Pay II (ALG II). This means that before qualifying for any support virtually all personal savings have to be exhausted. ALG II is supposed to provide “subsistence level” support, similar to the previous welfare assistance payments, but is paid at a clearly smaller rate. The maximum rate is just €345 a month—those living in eastern Germany receive somewhat less.

This is meant to pay for costs including electricity, telephone, hot water, clothes, food and additional medical payments and, of course, to also provide for travel expenses, renovating one’s home and old-age care insurance. The state

only pays for the sickness and old-age pension contributions, as well as “appropriate” housing costs and heating. Those living in a “dependent relationship” are expected to provide mutual support and the income of the other(s) is taken partially into account and deducted from any benefits payable. This also applies to unmarried couples and those living with another adult. For those working, after an allowance of €100, between 80 and 90 percent of their earnings are taken into account.

The “fraud cases” presented in detail in the brochure are mainly those providing allegedly false information about their home circumstances, those living with other people or with supplementary earnings. The source of the stories are the “descriptions and notes of [usually anonymous] staff working in various labour agencies and throughout Germany.” Usually, it is stressed that those concerned (whose names have all been “changed”) had charges raised against them. Remarkably, however, not a single case emerges in which a court has passed sentence. One searches in vain for any meaningful statistics or verifiable factual material.

The choice of words is demagogic and reaches an ugly climax in the following passage: “the term employed universally by biologists to describe organisms that partially or totally satisfy their need for food at the expense of other organisms—their hosts—is ‘parasite’. Of course, it is completely inadmissible to apply terms from the animal kingdom to humans. In the final analysis, social fraud is determined not by nature, but by the will of the individual.”

Characteristically, this remark follows a story concerning “Ibrahim, a singer from Lebanon” with a “black BMW Cabriolet in front of his house.” Nazi vocabulary is followed by racist clichés. A legal complaint of incitement has since been brought against the author of the ministry’s pamphlet.

Peter Clever, deputy chairman of the administrative board and the employers’ representative at the Federal Labour Agency (BA), claims abuse of the welfare system amounts “certainly to over 10 percent.” He considers this the “lower end of a serious estimate.”

The minister responsible, Clement, even maintains that one in five of those drawing welfare benefits is falsely claiming money from the state, and has expressly defended the comparison with parasites. He could not permit people to live at the expense of others, he said, and added, “That is what I call parasitic behaviour.”

Clement claims he is basing himself on “serious studies,” referring to a telephone campaign in which private call centres contacted unemployed people who had not registered for some months with the labour agencies. The Data Protection Commissioner has criticized this campaign. Clement and Clever suspect of abuse all those who could not be reached by telephone after several calls, or who exercised their right to refuse to answer the questioning. Hardly a serious investigation. Moreover, the BA admits that the “study” is not representative.

The target of the campaign is not to investigate but to provide fodder for the gutter press. A climate is being encouraged in which the unemployed and socially weak are stigmatised and criminalised, in order to prepare further social cuts, providing a diversion from the real causes of unemployment, and justification for the anti-social policies of past and future governments.

The aggressive tone of the brochure, with its references to “parasites,” is due to the fact that these policies are not accepted by broad sections of the population and the authors therefore see themselves forced on the defensive. They deplore “a universal claim to support by the welfare state.” People do not want to accept “that the welfare state should only be involved when the individual cannot help himself. The long-term financing of the welfare state clearly plays no role in the minds of such citizens. But such attitudes can only carry on because they find official or at least covert acknowledgement—in living rooms, in clubs, in bookshops and in politics. Unfortunately, that still happens far too frequently.”

Anyone providing the unemployed with independent advice, pointing out their legal rights or helping them formulate benefit appeals, is dubbed by the brochure an “agitator,” “scare monger” or “political troublemaker,” or is at least “aiding social fraud and rip-offs.”

Because the Left Party has raised verbal opposition against the welfare and labour reforms contained in the “Hartz IV” legislation, it is accused of being the “crony” of those who “mistake the welfare state for a milk cow, which can be tapped at will any time.”

The end of the section entitled “The Accomplices” contains a blunt warning to the unemployed that if they approach the labour agencies, they do so only as a humble petitioner. The agencies “know all the special arrangements—since many additional benefits, so-called

‘discretionary payments,’ are up to the case manager. Those who inform themselves over the Internet, or from telephone hotlines or from clever-sounding advisors, about how to extract as much as possible from the welfare state, often harm themselves.”

Here it becomes clear what is really meant by “parasites” and “rip-off merchants”: all those who believe the poor also enjoy rights and can make claims on the state, or who hold that the constitutional guarantee to protect human dignity and the individual’s right of self-determination applies to both the employed and unemployed.

The Ministry of Economics and Labour does not consider those whom the SPD-Green Party government has helped enrich at the expense of social spending to be “parasites and rip-off merchants.” The number of millionaires has risen from 510,000 to 775,000; 47 percent of social wealth is owned by the richest tenth of the population. In 2003, big business made approximately €300 billion in profits, but only paid €16 billion in taxes.

Under the next government, taxes are also set to fall for big business and the rich, while the fight against the unemployed will continue. No SPD or Christian Democratic politician entering the grand coalition has dissociated himself or herself from Clement’s use of the term “parasite.” The opposite is the case. The finance minister designate, Peer Steinbrück (SPD), responded by saying, “abuse will be fought decisively.”

The SPD chairman and future Labour and Social Affairs minister, Franz Müntefering, told the press, “Playing the system is not acceptable.” One simply cannot simply stand by and watch “while people stretch the law to cash in.” For Müntefering, workers or the unemployed are parasites if they try to use the law to their benefit.

The future chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) also made clear that, in her opinion, the problem is that at present the law allows people to make claims on the state: “It will not be enough to only centre on abuse,” she said. “We must also concern ourselves with the structural weaknesses that enable abuse.”

Even before the grand coalition has entered office, its most prominent representatives have already made clear that the participation of the Social Democrats is not a lesser evil or a social alternative to a government of the right.



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