

# German politicians propagate xenophobia in reaction to Berlin school violence

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At the end of March, the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper published a letter which had been sent a month previously by the staff at Rütli High School to the Berlin Senate's department of education. The school is situated in Neukölln, a Berlin suburb characterised by poverty, high unemployment and a large proportion of foreigners. Just 17 percent of pupils at Rütli High School are from families of German origin.

Teachers wrote the letter to complain about the aggressive behaviour of some of the pupils and their own desperate situation as guardians of youngsters deprived of any meaningful perspective. The letter stated the following: "The propensity to violence against articles of property is increasing. Doors are kicked in, waste paper baskets are used as footballs, fireworks are set off and framed pictures are torn from the walls. The behaviour of many classes is characterised by a complete rejection of the subjects taught, as well as an attitude and display of utter contempt. Teachers are treated dismissively, things are thrown at them, instructions are ignored. Some teachers will only go into certain classes if they have a mobile phone in case they need to call for help."

"Teachers have reached the limits of their endurance. The school is in need of more teachers and social workers who can speak Arabic and Turkish. Furthermore, it must be seriously considered whether the high school form—as part of the German high school, secondary modern and grammar schools system—is any longer appropriate."

"When we look at developments in our school over recent years, we have to say that the high school form of education has reached a dead end and there is no longer any chance of its reform. What sense does it make to collect into one school form all those pupils whom neither parents nor the business world can offer perspectives for a meaningful life? ... High school isolates them, stigmatises them and they behave accordingly."

This account is by no means exceptional. Berlin's Senate administration has published figures revealing how violence in many of the city's schoolyards increased last year. In

2005, a total of 894 cases of violence were registered, in contrast to 560 the year before. Two-thirds of the cases involved bodily injury. Cases of serious threat of violence rose from 97 to 159. In addition, there were 196 assaults on teachers, compared to 156 in 2005.

Having failed to react to the teachers' letter for a month, Berlin's Education Senator Klaus Böger (SPD—Social Democratic Party) took action immediately after the publication of the letter in the *Tagesspiegel* by placing the school under police protection. He commissioned six police officers and two social workers to Rütli High School to impose a state of order.

Moreover, he filled the post of school principal, which had been vacant for almost a year. Consideration was also given to merging the school with the neighbouring Heinrich Heine Secondary Modern School, although it faced similar problems.

Politicians and the media nationwide have attacked the Rütli teachers' letter in order to initiate a right-wing, xenophobic campaign. They divorce the problem of school violence from its social context and try to convince the public that the responsibility for violence lies in the lack of willingness on the part of foreigners to integrate into German society.

Friedbert Pflüger, the main CDU (Christian Democratic Union) candidate for the Berlin parliamentary election in September, declared to the *Neue Presse* newspaper that serial offenders have to be "if necessary, deported, insofar as the nation's alien laws make this possible."

CSU (Christian Social Union) Chairman Edmund Stoiber also wants to deport troublesome youth to the home countries of their parents. He told the *Bild* boulevard press: "After an initial warning, a person's right to remain in Germany should be revoked if he or she persists in refusing to integrate."

Other politicians from the CDU/CSU coalition made similar observations. Katherina Reiche, the CDU education spokesperson, suggested threatening the parents of criminal foreign pupils with financial fines. "A lot of parents neglect

their parental duties in a spectacular manner,” she claimed.

There was also a loud call for more police to be stationed in schools. Federal Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble exclaimed that zero tolerance should be shown towards violent pupils. “At the end of the day,” he said, “the young people only reflect a society that increasingly fails to set clear behavioural limits and to resolutely demonstrate and enforce important behavioural standards.”

Pflüger also wants to solve problems in schools by sending in state forces. “We have to decide whether the presence of police is necessary and, as in New York, the use of metal detectors to find concealed weapons,” he told *Spiegel* magazine. In making this statement, Pflüger certainly has his sights set on the coming election. He is hoping to win votes from the extreme right by promoting a tough commitment to law and order.

It is obvious that the violence in schools has social causes for which the Berlin Senate and the federal government are equally responsible. High unemployment and the absence of any perspective for the future, together with continual cuts to educational and social provision, have produced explosive conditions in the schools. It is not a problem of integration, but a social problem—and one that is affecting foreign youth most severely, only because the society has denied them any chance of a meaningful future.

Two weeks ago, Berlin’s incumbent Mayor Klaus Wowereit boasted on a TV chat show that the city had made savings of €600 million in public service staffing. Public transport employees were made to accept wage cuts of 8 to 12 percent. There were also cuts in public education. Since 2003, vocational colleges have received €1.68 million less for text books and the number of infants to be managed by each carer in day nurseries has increased from 16 to 21.

Peter Sinram, press spokesman for the Education and Science Trade Union (GEW) in Berlin, explained to the *Junge Welt* newspaper: “But [Education Senator] Böger hasn’t equipped schools to have much of a chance of dealing with the problems. Underemployment of teaching staff in schools already having to cancel lessons, the dismantling of jobs relating to psychological counselling in schools, the closure of primary schools (even though this is where problem cases can be treated more effectively) and the increasing proportion of elderly teachers—these are only some of the outstanding deficiencies.”

Neukölln is one of the Berlin districts where poverty is concentrated. Its unemployment rate of 22.9 percent in 2003 put it in third place behind Kreuzberg and Wedding in the capital city’s unemployment table. Some 30 percent of Neukölln’s inhabitants have no vocational training qualifications. At the end of 2004, it had the greatest proportion, 15.8 percent, of social benefit recipients in

Berlin. The situation was allowed to deteriorate further with the introduction of the federal government’s tough Hartz 4 measures, designed to force the unemployed into low-pay jobs. Even at that time, poverty was already on the increase.

Furthermore, the three-tier German school system that divides children after primary school into grammar, secondary modern and high schools results in educationally disadvantaged children from the more socially deprived families being separated early in life from other children of the same age. In recent years, the high school has increasingly developed into a holding station for all those who have nothing more to expect from life as far as a vocation is concerned. According to Brigitte Pick, the previous principal of Rütli High School, not a single pupil from the last academic year was able to find a firm ready to offer him or her job training.

Under conditions where young people find themselves trapped in this kind of social deprivation, an aggressive school climate is bound to develop. Oliver Lück, head of the Berlin/Brandenburg’s Anti-Violence Centre, commented: “Children from such districts are normally socialized in a brutal way at an early age. Violence has become for them the simplest and most economical way to experience feelings of success and power. Aggression and violence represent for these children a very economic strategy for survival.... They need aggression to temporarily escape what they perceive as their low status. Otherwise, they experience no feelings of success, either at school or at home or in society in general.”

Violence represents a last possibility to cope with life in a world where young people are deprived of any chance of successful integration into their social environment or shaping their future. There are parallels here to the situation in the deprived districts of urban France that exploded into outright rebellion last year. In Neukölln and the comparable districts of other cities, a ghettoization of the poorest social layers, and particularly of foreigners and refugees, is under way. In 2005, Neukölln had a 22 percent proportion of foreigners, while the whole of Berlin had only 13.6 percent. Areas of concentrated poverty are being neglected and left to their own fate.



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