

Berlin youth goes on a rampage—a symptom of a society in decline

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In recent weeks, media attention in Germany has focussed on Berlin following a public appeal for help by a number of teachers at the Rütli High School and an attack by extreme rightists on a parliamentary deputy of the Left Party-PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism). Now, a violent incident involving a knife-wielding teenager has thrown the spotlight on social decline in the German capital.

On his way home from the official opening of Berlin's new central railway station on the evening of May 26, 16-year-old Mike P. used a knife to slash his way through a crowd, indiscriminately wounding over 30 people. Gerd Neubeck, deputy head of Berlin's police force, spoke of stab wounds "in backs, posteriors and chests."

Some 24 of the victims had to be taken to hospital, 15 of them remaining as in-patients. Six people sustained critical injuries and had to undergo emergency operations. All of the wounded are recovering, but because one of the first victims was HIV positive, all who came into contact with his blood face the threat of infection. Tests to establish with any certainty whether the virus has been transmitted can be carried out only after several weeks.

According to police statements, Mike P. was overpowered by private security guards a few minutes after his attack. He is said to have been extremely drunk at the time, and to have violently resisted arrest. He was carrying the weapon used in the attacks and was identified by several witnesses as the culprit. When questioned, Mike P. denied committing the offence and said he could recollect very little of what happened because he had been drunk.

An arrest warrant was immediately issued. The teenager is accused of attempted murder in 24 cases, as well as having caused grievous bodily harm. Nevertheless, Berlin's deputy chief of police declared, "There is no evidence that the deed was planned in advance."

Events triggering Mike P.'s rampage remain unclear. So far all that is known is that he, his girlfriend and another friend wanted to attend the central station's opening ceremony. According to a statement from the friend, Mike P. was "acting normal" and "not aggressive" that evening. The

three of them had "met some new people" and spent a considerable time with them. Mike P. was observed to be keeping his distance from one particular man in the group.

Later that evening, this man rejoined Mike P.'s group. Mike P.'s friend informed the *Berliner Morgenpost* that the man's nose was bleeding badly, and the man told him Mike P. had smashed his elbow into his face and robbed him of his mobile phone. Then Mike P. disappeared.

Mike P.'s previous life was not very different from those of millions of others. He grew up in a family of six siblings in Berlin-Lichterfelde. When his parents separated two years ago, he moved into a rented flat in the Neukölln district, together with his father and a brother.

According to the *Berliner Morgenpost*, he was forced to leave a high school in Steglitz "because of irregularities." The teenager quit his last job at a call centre because he was annoyed by "inconsistency concerning payment of wages."

In a television interview, his elder brother described the 16-year-old as a kind and sensitive person. He wrote poems to his girlfriend, and was loving to his nephews and his younger siblings. According to a statement from one of his cousins published in the *Tagesspiegel*, he was "actually, a very nice boy." When his four brothers and sisters paid their regular visits to Neukölln, he always "looked after them in a really loving way" and took them to the playground.

However, the cousin admitted that Mike P. spent a lot of time sitting at home in front of his computer, playing violent computer games and skipping school. "He was often in a lethargic mood and worried about getting a job," the cousin told the *Tagesspiegel*. He was already known to the police for attacking a schoolmate and, on another occasion, breaking a school window.

According to the *Bild am Sonntag*, neighbours describe Mike P. as quick-tempered. He often carried a knuckleduster and a knife. He was also said to have frequently smoked marijuana. However, when the police searched the young man's room, no weapons were found.

Ehrhart Körting (Social Democratic Party-SPD), Berlin's senator for internal affairs, immediately portrayed the

rampage as the irrational behaviour of a particular individual that could neither be explained nor prevented. “We are dealing here with a highly unique case,” he said. “Unfortunately, such a deed can never be completely precluded.”

Heinz Buschkowsky (SPD), the mayor of Berlin-Neukölln, said, “Let’s not yet again make social conditions in Neukölln responsible for such a deed.” It was certainly possible that there could be at least one “drunken idiot” among the 300,000 residents of the district, Buschkowsky added.

However, such “unique occurrences” have been occurring more and more frequently in recent years. In April 2002, 19-year-old Robert Steinhäuser shot dead 16 people at his former school, and then took his own life. In February of the same year, a 22-year-old killed the principal of a vocational college and seriously injured a teacher, before shooting himself.

Two years previously, a 16-year-old pupil shot the principal of a boarding school in Bavaria. He then shot himself in the head. In the autumn of 1999, a 15-year-old grammar school pupil went into a classroom and stabbed a 44-year-old female teacher in front of his schoolmates. Just three weeks later, three teenagers in Bavaria were arrested and charged with planning to murder their principal and another female teacher.

In each case, politicians and media commentators have rushed to proclaim the eruption of violence as the inexplicable behaviour of a psychopath or mentally deranged individual. But such rash and complacent assessments serve only to block any serious consideration of the deeper social roots of these violent outbursts.

How are we to explain why a 16-year-old teenager would attack other people in such a brutally aggressive way, seeking to cause them as much bodily harm and suffering as possible? How much despair and hopelessness, how deep a sense that future prospects are non-existent must there be for such actions to be taken? How sick is a society that produces this kind of anger, frustration and destructive energy in its young people?

By ignoring these questions, Körting and his like attempt to evade their own social and political responsibility. The rampage in Berlin constitutes, above all, an indictment of an elite layer which, through its ruthless determination to increase the wealth of the rich, has brought about a profound social crisis.

Ever broader sections of the population are becoming victims of unemployment and poverty. Those who have a job are faced with intensifying attacks on their wages and working conditions, along with the constant fear of being laid off. Art and culture are now largely reserved for the

privileged few. Even while still at school, many youngsters come to view the world of work as offering nothing but a life of setbacks and insecurity.

This social climate of frustration and hopelessness gives rise to conditions that fuel aggressive and violent tendencies in individuals like Mike P. It is no coincidence that the latest rampage occurred in Berlin. In many respects the capital city has become a symbol of deepening social tensions that are spreading across the nation.

In recent years, the policies of the governing coalition of the SPD and the Left Party-PDS have produced a social catastrophe in Berlin. After four years of the so-called “red-red” coalition, more than 500,000 people live below the official poverty line, and the city’s unemployment rate is over 18 percent. Neukölln itself is a district plagued by poverty. Nearly every third resident lacks a vocational training qualification. At the end of December 2004, Neukölln had the capital’s highest rate (15.8 percent) of social welfare recipients.

The Left Party-PDS, in particular, plays an important role in preventing widespread popular opposition from developing into a progressive social movement. For all its fine speeches, this party fears nothing more than an independent political movement of the working class. Its cowardly adaptation to the capitalist system and its constant talk of social reforms within the existing socio-economic framework—reforms that are undermined every day by the consequences of a globalized capitalist economy—repel many young people.

This party bears a great deal of responsibility for the fact that social distress often expresses itself in reactionary ways.

In a situation where all of the political parties cooperate to enforce policies hostile to the interests of the general population, and thereby bring about a devastating social decline, the most pressing task is the building of a party that offers a way out of the social and cultural impasse on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective.



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