

Week one of the World Cup

While millions celebrate, German government presses ahead with its agenda

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In the course of the past week millions of football fans in Germany and hundreds of millions around the world have celebrated and lamented in turn as the football World Cup produced its first winners and losers. The international dimension of the World Cup being held in a host of German cities is unmistakable. Trains, buses and streets in Berlin and other major German cities have been turned into a sea of color, with fans from every corner of the globe sporting the shirts, scarves and caps of their national teams.

The small percentage of supporters able to pay the extortionate prices for World Cup tickets are grouped together in national blocks inside the stadiums, but outside great numbers of ordinary fans of different nationalities have mixed together to watch the matches on giant television screens. Even organizers of the World Cup have been surprised by the turnout of fans who preferred to celebrate together in front of communal screens rather than watch the proceedings in their own homes. Up to half a million predominantly young people have congregated before huge screens erected in the Tiergarten behind Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to watch some of the matches.

German flags (produced in China) have sold out in German shops, but flags from each of the 32 nations represented at the World Cup are on show. The entire façade of a housing block in Berlin's Kreuzberg district has been draped with large flags from all 32 nations. In the same suburb (which has a large Turkish community), many cars sport both German and Turkish flags. Newspapers report on young German fans who exchange their German T-shirt for a Brazilian one depending on which team is playing that day, and when their own team is not playing, many German supporters are quite prepared to switch allegiance temporarily. Over the weekend, Ghanaian players playing in Cologne thanked German fans for their support as the underdog African club beat the experienced Czech side 2-0.

The relative ease with which fans from different nationalities have mixed and joined in the festivities reflects an objective process of integration also increasingly taking place on the football field. In its victory over Poland last week, the German team relied on the skills of two players, Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski, who were born in Poland and now hold German nationality. The pair apparently speak to one another in their native language on the field. The winning goal for Germany was scored in the last minute by Oliver Neuville, born in Switzerland.

In last week's game between Trinidad & Tobago and England, virtually all of the players on the field were employed by English football clubs. The England team (apart from players like captain David Beckham who plays for Real Madrid) is drawn from First

Division clubs, while the overwhelming majority of the Trinidad & Tobago players are active for clubs in the Third and Fourth divisions. It is worth noting that there has been substantial public opposition directed against those groups of neo-Nazis intent on encouraging racism, aggression and nationalism around the football matches. This is not a repetition of the Berlin Olympics of 1936.

While millions of ordinary football supporters from across Europe and all over the world see the World Cup as a welcome opportunity to escape from the humdrum of their everyday working lives (or unemployment), the German government, big business and sections of the media are deliberately using the festivities around the tournament to press ahead with their own social and political agenda.

German chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and her grand coalition government (CDU and Social Democratic Party—SPD) recognize that the World Cup provides an ideal opportunity to divert the public's attention from social realities and push forward their policies.

Officially, every effort is made to encourage nationalism. Merkel has demanded that at least one German cabinet member be in attendance at all the World Cup games and all the limousines transporting German politicians across Berlin now ostentatiously display the national flag.

Although it is well known that Merkel has little interest in football, she was conspicuously in attendance at last week's duel between German and Poland. In the comfort of luxury "hospitality" suites and VIP lounges, government and cabinet members can continue their ongoing discussions with the business and finance elite.

However, the coalition regime is also very active outside the football arena. Cynical members of the ruling elite take advantage of such bursts of 'civic pride' and genuine public enthusiasm, as the World Cup has presently generated in Germany, which tend to weaken the political defense mechanisms of the population, to pursue their selfish interests quite ruthlessly. As the magazine *Der Spiegel* notes in its current edition: "The World Cup is a stroke of luck for the grand coalition."

During the opening week of the World Cup the coalition government pushed through both houses of the German parliament a three-percent increase in Value Added Tax (Mehrwertsteuer). The increase, due to come into effect at the start of 2007, represents the biggest single tax hike in postwar German history and will primarily hit low-income earners and the poor. At last week's regular Bundestag (parliament) press conference, where such decisions are debated and subject to questioning, only a handful of journalists

turned up and debate was muted.

German president Horst Köhler, who sat alongside Merkel at the German-Poland match, has used the occasion of the World Cup to express his enthusiasm for what he terms a “healthy patriotism” (a sinister phrase!) in Germany. He simultaneously called upon the Merkel government to speed up its efforts to dismantle the German welfare state, as well as its measures to reward big business. On Sunday Köhler told *Deutschlandfunk* (national radio) that a “revision of the German welfare state principle” was a priority. “Things cannot be allowed to remain as they are in the social sphere,” Köhler said in Berlin, and went on to emphasize that the country’s postwar constitution offers no guarantee of specific social compensatory measures.

Köhler’s initiative is seen as a prod to the government to intensify its efforts to break up the German health insurance system, based on a parity system of contributions by employer and employee, in favor of a private system making health provision dependent on income. Köhler’s proposals were immediately backed by the German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD); the latter also made clear that the government would not be prepared to step in and fund health coverage for children from low-income families out of the national budget. The cabinet has set mid-July as a deadline for putting the finishing touches on new health reform measures.

Köhler also called for a reduction in ancillary wage costs—another favorite theme of Steinbrück, whose own plans for a further reduction of business taxes is due to be presented to the appropriate coalition committee on June 25.

President Köhler, furthermore, demanded changes to the government’s Hartz IV unemployment measures. His comments come at a time when the draconian measures first introduced by the former SPD-Green Party coalition government, led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD), are increasingly coming under attack. According to critics in government and business circles, the miserly rates of support provided by Hartz IV are still too high to force the unemployed to take on any kind of low-paid work and supposedly encourage abuse on the part of recipients.

The intensified campaign against the unemployed follows the recent scandalous remark by new SPD chairman Kurt Beck, who declared that the jobless were under no compulsion to draw the full amount of their unemployment pay. While German companies rack up record profits and their managers unprecedented earnings, Beck suggests that the unemployed should think twice before drawing their princely allowance of up to 345 euros (\$US 434) per month!

Predictably, Beck’s comment was followed by calls from the CDU last week for an official form of compulsory work service for the unemployed. The last such *Arbeitsdienst* in Germany was the forced labor scheme introduced by Hitler’s National Socialists. Now Köhler has joined the chorus of those calling for new measures to further whittle down Germany’s welfare state and intimidate the unemployed.

Germany’s industrial elite has also seen fit to announce plans for drastic new job cuts in the middle of the World Cup. Volkswagen executive Horst Neumann declared at the weekend that a total of 30,000 jobs were threatened at the auto concern. Until recently the company had spoken of the necessity of shedding 20,000 jobs. Now a further 10,000 jobs are at risk and management also raised the possibility of shifting production of the Golf model from the company’s main German factory at Wolfsburg, if workers are not prepared to accept an increase of over six hours in working time at no

extra pay.

With continuous bulletins and updates of World Cup matches, scandals and gossip dominating television news and many newspapers, the German public, football fans and non-fans alike, has been denied any proper analysis or information regarding international developments and the role currently being played by its own government. These are simply drowned out by sports news—something that may be familiar in the US, but is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe.

The coalition government took other measures last week that were barely mentioned in the press, including support for the prolongation of the United Nations operation in Ethiopia and Eritrea—a mission that includes the participation of German observers. Renewed German support for UN activities in these two African countries comes upon the heels of the recent decision by the government to send troops to the Congo as part of a mission by the European Union. These actions, couched in terms of Germany accepting its responsibility for international ‘peacekeeping’ and so on, reveal, in fact, the increasing aggressiveness of German imperialism on a world scale.

Both Merkel and the German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (CDU) have made explicit comments recently as to the necessity of orienting Germany’s expanding military operations along the lines of more directly serving national interests.

One last remark should be made in regard to the World Cup and the emergence of a supposed “healthy nationalism” in Germany. In the forefront of the political forces encouraging such nationalism is the Green Party. The content of such a “healthy nationalism” was made clear at the outset of the football competition when the leader of the Greens, Claudia Roth, joined forces with one of Germany’s most right-wing politicians—Bavaria’s law-and-order interior minister, Günther Beckstein—to lead a thoroughly reactionary protest against the presence of the Iranian team at the latter’s opening game.

While Roth’s predecessor as head of the Greens, Joschka Fischer, has recently been rewarded for his services to the American state and its war in Iraq with a plum job at Princeton University, his successor has no problem lining up with extreme right forces in Germany in a campaign that plays into the hands of those calling for new imperialist aggression in the Middle East.



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