

Germany: Background to the debate over child care

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A fierce debate has taken place during the past few weeks inside the ranks of Germany's conservative parties about plans put forward by the family affairs secretary, Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), for an expansion of nursery school places in Germany.

Walter Mixa, the Catholic bishop of Augsburg, has sung the praises of the traditional family structure, accused von der Leyen of "ideological blindness" and declared she was intent on reintroducing the sort of conditions that existed in former East Germany ("GDR conditions"). Also chiming in has been Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union, CSU), along with other right-wing conservatives from the CSU, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Church.

The same Mixa—a pioneer on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI's archaic and reactionary edicts on abortion and family-control measures—now pontificates about "the dignity of women," who are being degraded to mere "baby-making machines" by the family affairs secretary.

However, the fact that the reactionary Mixa has chosen to turn his sights on von der Leyen should not lead anyone to conclude there is anything progressive in the proposals made by the CDU minister. While seeking to exploit the media to the full extent by posing as a pioneer for equal rights and opportunities for women, her plan for the expansion of nursery places is in fact aimed at intensifying inequality and social divisions between the better-off, upper-middle-class layers and working class families.

Her proposal for nursery places corresponds to the demands of business circles for qualified technical personnel who can be employed as cheaply as possible—in particular, well-trained young women. Von der Leyen's plans are completely in line with the measures introduced at the start of this year to provide parents of newly born babies with subsidies based on parental income, rather than a general allowance for all new parents. The new measures are especially punitive for single parents and the unemployed.

Von der Leyen's proposals have been welcomed by German business associations and institutes, as well as by numerous CDU and FDP politicians, including Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and the right-wing prime minister of the state of Hesse, Roland Koch.

What is behind this controversy? On International Woman's Day (March 8), the European Union Commission submitted a report about levels of sexual equality in the member states of the European Union. Following another EU report (Pisa), which had criticised school and university education in Germany, this latest report revealed that Germany was well under the average rating with regard to sexual equality and childcare provision.

The OECD has also issued a report that throws a negative light on childcare in Germany. Not only is the gulf between the wages of male

and female employees much greater in Germany (22 percent compared to the EU average of 15 percent; in France, 12 percent), but levels of childcare and child support are considerably lower than in other European countries. With a birth rate of 1.36 and an employment rate for women of less than 60 percent, Germany falls below the European average. In particular, the EU Commission criticised the lack of nursery places and the restrictive opening times of German kindergartens.

In west Germany, children up to the age of three are mainly cared for by their parents. Only 5 percent of all children of this age have access to a nursery place or day mother. In the former East Germany, this percentage stands at around 20 percent.

Heading the EU statistics for childcare is France, followed by Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries. In France, infants from the age of two months have the chance of a nursery place. Forty percent of two-year-olds and 99 percent of all three-year-old children attend French nurseries, which are free of charge.

Now, the German family affairs secretary has reacted to the negative results of these studies with a plan to increase nursery places in Germany from the current level of 250,000 to 750,000 by the year 2013. Nursery places are to be made available for 35 percent of all children under three years of age. Von der Leyen's measures also have the support of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, but both parties have made clear that no new finance is to be made available for the measures—i.e., they are to be paid for by cuts in other social budgets.

According to Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD), all family allowances must to be "put to the test." In fact, what he has in mind are measures to subsidise the new allowances for better-off mothers by cuts in general levels of child benefits—to the detriment of poorer families.

Before TV cameras, Steinbrück alleged that the government currently spends €184 billion for family support. In response, a judge for the Hesse social court, Jürgen Borchert, commented in an interview on German television April 15: "It is absurd when the Ministry of Families maintains that families receive 185 billion euros. Families are not supported in Germany, but rather shackled to poverty. They are the donkeys forced to bear the load of the social state."

Borchert had already harshly criticised the new measures brought in at the start of the year to regulate child support. "The law means an extreme re-distribution from the poor to the rich: low-income earners are being bled to finance top earners," Borchert told the *tageszeitung* on January 4.

The main concern of the ministers in Germany's grand coalition is the lack of a generation of technical workers suitably qualified for

global companies. They are reacting to the results of studies that demonstrate that only 60 percent of female academics go on to have babies, while large numbers of university and college graduates have moved abroad to find work—e.g., as doctors in the Scandinavian countries. Only 26 percent of leading positions in Germany are filled by women, who constitute just 15 percent of professors at German universities—although 59 percent of all college graduates are women.

Business representatives have been pressuring for improvements in pre-school education. Jürgen Hambrecht, chairman of the board of BASF, in February presented a study by the German Economy Institute (IW/Köln) in Berlin that explained that those who regarded family models incorporating working mothers as the wrong way to go were neglecting Germany's problems. He referred to the increasing lack of specialists. "Ever-fewer young persons and graduates will be at the disposal of the job market in future," he said, "Knowledge is the fuel that will drive the economic future of our country."

The finance and business elite are not only demanding technical personnel, but also the greatest level of flexibility by their workforces and as little time lost as possible through maternity or parental leave. The current plan by the Ministry of Families for the creation of workplace kindergartens is aimed at solving this problem.

Despite all the talk of equal opportunities, von der Leyen's proposals are aimed directly at encouraging the promotion of an elitist schools and university system. The government wants to facilitate motherhood for academically educated, highly qualified women as opposed to working class women, immigrants or those dependent on welfare payments. In this respect, von der Leyen is encouraging the sort of bourgeois feminist ideas that have been criticised in religious circles.

It is already the case that mothers in most German cities must prove they have a job before being eligible for a nursery place. In some cities such as Dresden, there have been incidents of unemployed parents being pressured to take their children out of kindergartens. At the same time, private nurseries are springing up for the children of the wealthy. The Villa Ritz has recently opened in the city of Potsdam offering for the first group of 10 children language instruction in English, Spanish and Chinese, plus yoga sessions, piano lessons, riding and a bio-kitchen. The nursery has its own sauna and also offers psychological support for the children. The basic package costs €1,000 a month with optional extras available such as bodyguards, chauffeurs and riding instruction.

In this respect, the reference to re-establishing "GDR conditions" with regard to childcare is completely misplaced. From the start of the 1970s, there was a widespread expansion of childcare facilities in the GDR; and at the beginning of the 1980s, crèches, kindergartens and day nurseries were made available for every East German child. In 1989, the ratio of children attending crèches stood at approximately 80 percent, around 95 percent attended kindergartens and 80 percent day schools.

The opening times of the nurseries were adapted to the working hours of the mothers. Kindergartens and crèches opened at 6:00 a.m. and were open continuously until 6:00 p.m. If necessary—for example, when parents took part in further education—care on Saturdays was also available. Day schools were open all day during holidays. The costs for parents requiring all-day childcare were minimal and limited to paying for meals.

This type of childcare made it possible for women to pursue a vocational activity or undertake further education, regardless of social status, and therefore represented a step towards more independence

for women.

The GDR was neither a socialist state, nor an example of "real existing socialism," as is often claimed. The working class was politically oppressed and stripped of its rights by a privileged Stalinist bureaucracy. Nevertheless, state ownership of the means of production made possible a greater degree of social equality than in the West. The authoritarian and conservative teaching methods used in the childcare institutions, with which the SED leadership ought to suppress any critical thought in a new generation, did not alter the fact that the universal public system of childcare represented a social gain.

The subsequent introduction of capitalist conditions after the reunification of Germany in 1990 brought about a drastic deterioration in the situation for childcare in the east of the country. It was von der Leyen's party under the leadership of Chancellor Kohl, and with the support of the SPD and the former GDR leadership, that organised a campaign of devastation in the GDR—including huge attacks on childcare.

Women were doubly affected—not only by the destruction of jobs in industry but also the growing deficit of childcare places, which became increasingly expensive and limited to a few hours per day for the unemployed. Working class women were especially hard hit and reduced to a more traditional role in the family. This is reflected in the drastic decrease of the birth rate in the former GDR. Many couples decided to do without children in order to have better chances of finding work. After German reunification, the birth rate fell to 0.77 children per woman, and the birth rate in eastern Germany still remains considerably lower than that in the west.

Von der Leyen's childcare scheme is entirely consistent with these policies of social cuts. Her proposals are in line with all the other measures of the grand coalition aimed at improving the competitiveness of German companies on the global market. Meanwhile, the issue that has been neglected in the entire debate is the needs of children.

Nobody is proposing better training or an increase in the numbers of nursery personnel, although the carer-child ratio has worsened continually in recent years. Nothing is said about establishing improved conditions for the better integration of immigrant children or children from socially deprived environments. Integrated kindergartens and integration classes at schools have also been axed in the name of a balanced budget.

A genuinely comprehensive and qualitatively high level of care for children, including those from low-income families, based on equal chances of development for all children, requires a common struggle by workers of both sexes for a socialist policy that opposes the interests of big business and the financial elite.



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