

Right-wing mob attacks group of Indians in eastern Germany

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In the early hours of Sunday, August 19, a group of eight Indians was attacked by a drunken mob during a street party held in the German town of Mügeln. The eight men, who either worked at the town's Indian restaurant or were friends of the owner, were attacked by a mob of around 50 youth. The small town of Mügeln is located in the eastern German state of Saxony, which has seen a number of violent racist attacks in recent years.

The eight Indians were attacked by dozens of drunken youth yelling racist slogans, who began hitting and kicking members of the heavily outnumbered group. Photos later taken of the injured men made clear the extent of their injuries. All were badly injured, with severe bruising and cuts to the face and body. One of the victims required prolonged hospital treatment and a number of the group required stitches to treat extensive facial injuries, evidently caused by repeated kicks to the face.

Following the initial attack by the group of youth, the eight victims fled the street party across the town's marketplace and took refuge in a nearby restaurant. The owner let them in, but the crowd of youth besieged the restaurant and sought to kick down its doors before a crowd of onlookers. Members of the group of Indians said they feared for their lives. Only after the intervention of regional police was any sort of order restored. Just two of the attackers, aged 21 and 23, were arrested on Saturday night, but later released.

Despite the obvious racist nature of the attack the immediate response by police and local politicians was to play down the attack and the police immediately denied there was a political motive behind it. A police spokeswoman in the central city of Leipzig told the German news agency DDP Monday that there was no indication of a neo-Nazi motive for the attack, despite eyewitness accounts that noted the continuous stream of racist insults directed at the small group of foreign workers.

Speaking to reporters after the incident, the town's mayor, Gotthard Deuse, told reporters there were no neo-Nazis in the town and that, if the incident did have a far-right motive, it was most likely caused by outsiders. Deuse also indicated that the police had prior warning there would be trouble at the street party. In the event they had done nothing to prevent it.

The Saxon prime minister, Georg Milbradt, (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) visited the small town Monday and condemned the assault, while at the same uttering platitudes to reporters aimed at qualifying the attack.

In fact, this latest incident is one of a series of violent assaults on foreigners in eastern German towns and cities that have taken place in the one-and-half decades since German reunification. While the nationalist, narrow-minded climate which prevailed in the former

Stalinist GDR has certainly played a role in reinforcing backward prejudices in eastern Germany, the fact remains that a number of the youth involved in recent racist attacks were only born after the dissolution of the GDR in 1989-90.

In fact, extreme right-wing sentiments and neo-Nazi organisations such as the National Democratic Party NPD, have only been able to flourish in a number of villages and towns in eastern Germany because of the lack of jobs and devastation of industry in the region, which has been carried out and supported by all of Germany's principal political parties. Under conditions where an economic wasteland has been created in large areas of the former East Germany since reunification in 1990, every major political organisation—irrespective of whether it has its roots in the west or the east—has argued that there is no alternative to mass unemployment and the growth of endemic poverty for large sections of the population.

This includes the newly formed Left Party, which in the guise of its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), has worked closely with both the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the CDU at a state and local level to implement the rationalisation of the East German industrial and social base—with devastating consequences for jobs and living standards. In Saxony, for example, the Left Party has played a leading role in selling off publicly owned housing stock in Dresden to private equity financiers—resulting in major increases in rents and property prices.

It is this close collaboration between the conservative right and nominal "left" that has enabled extreme right-wing groups to win influence amongst youth in eastern German states such as Saxony.

A recent study by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development indicated the extent of the crisis. Following the widespread closure of industries and public services that had been established in former Stalinist East Germany, many of the eastern states have been hit by a wave of migration, with young people seeking work either in western Germany or abroad. An estimated 1.5 million (i.e., 10 percent of the total population of former East Germany) have left the region in search of work since 1990. Most of those who have left are under 35 and include many with an above average education or training.

The reasons behind the mass migration are primarily economic. Despite some local differences between the states, the economy in former East Germany continues to lag far behind that in western Germany. Unemployment in many local towns and villages stands at more than 25 percent, while in some East German towns this figure reaches as high as 50 percent. The result is that many of the towns and villages of eastern Germany are populated by high proportions of elderly citizens and young people lacking qualifications who have

little chance of finding a reasonable job, often referred to as a “lost generation.”

The Berlin study concludes: “In those regions where the economic problems are largest, a new, male-dominated underclass has developed, the members of which are excluded from participation in large parts of the society.... Many of them have no job, no education and no partner. It is exactly these difficult conditions that make it more difficult to slow the negative demographic trend or even to reverse it.”

This lack of opportunity is compounded by poverty. A recent study by the Bertelsmann Institute reveals that (with two exceptions in western Germany—the city states of Bremen and Hamburg) states in eastern Germany have the highest percentages of families dependent on the minimal levels of unemployment pay established by the Hartz IV welfare reform laws. While Saxony is praised in the report for its “solid budget policy,” nearly 10 percent of the state’s population is dependent on Hartz IV payments.

Poverty and desperation—based on a complete lack of opportunity, arising primarily from the anti-social policies of the former SPD—Green Party coalition, now continued and intensified by the current grand coalition government (CDU/CSU—SPD)—have created a fertile breeding ground in the east for layers of youth attracted to the extreme-right populism of organisations such as the National Democratic Party (NPD).

In elections in September 2004 the far-right NPD was able to win several seats in Saxony’s state assembly, having won over 9 percent of the vote in the state election. The ultra-right party combined populist opposition to the Hartz IV laws introduced by the SPD-Green coalition with racist declamations of foreign workers. The NPD was able to win support mainly in deprived rural areas adjoining the Czech Republic, where unemployment often exceeds 25 percent. The region known as Swiss Saxony to the east of Dresden is regarded as a stronghold of the neo-Nazis. Just two days before the state election in Saxony in September 2004, former chancellor Gerhard Schröder had provocatively accused the German population of having a “benefits mentality.”

At the same time, leading CDU and SPD politicians have come together to implement draconian social cuts and a huge rationalisation of industry in the state of Saxony—at the behest of the federal government in Berlin. The state parliament was led since reunification until 2002 by the right-wing CDU veteran politician Kurt Biedenkopf, who gave up a leading academic post in the west of the country to spearhead the reintroduction of capitalism in the east.

Biedenkopf played a leading role in developing the close network of political and business connections, which has allowed a small handful of high-tech companies, building concerns and banks to reap huge profits at the cost of the population at large.

Having created the economic conditions for the growth of right-wing radicalism, Biedenkopf and the CDU fuel to the fire with provocative political initiatives, combined with turning a blind eye to the activities of neo-fascist groups. When a violent mob drove asylum-seekers out of the town of Hoyerswerda in 1991 and police looked on passively, Saxony’s head of state declined to comment.

In the decade following reunification, Biedenkopf’s state government gained a reputation as a haven for right-wing politicians. From 1990 until 2000 the Justice Ministry was headed by Steffen Heitmann, whose name cropped up in headlines in 1993 when, following a visit to the city of Stuttgart, he declared: “Germans must be protected against too many foreigners!”

In 2002 Biedenkopf handed over power to his party colleague and long-time Saxony finance minister Georg Milbradt, who has been a member of the CDU since 1973. Despite Biedenkopf’s explicit opposition, his former finance minister was elected prime minister of Saxony in April 2002. Milbradt currently governs the state in a grand coalition with the SPD.

In addition to continuing his predecessor’s policies of close relations to big business and the banks (Milbradt played a leading role as Saxony’s finance minister in propelling the state-owned Sachsen LB bank onto the international finance markets—resulting in the recent bankruptcy of the bank with debts of €17.3 billion euros, or US\$23.3 billion), Milbradt continues Biedenkopf’s tradition of attempting to outflank the neo-fascists by taking over their programme.

In 2005, Milbradt told an international audience attending commemorations of the bombing of Dresden: “Our message to other countries is that the vast majority of the population does not support the NPD. They have no influence on the regional government and their chances of ever coming to power are nil.”

In fact, Milbradt’s method for isolating the NPD is to adopt their programme. As recently as the end of July Milbradt gave an interview to the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* in which he took up a basic demand of extreme-right parties, i.e., opposition to opening up the German labour market to workers from eastern European countries.

In his interview, Milbradt warned against the danger of cheap wage labour from eastern Europe threatening German workers. This he declared could lead to increased votes for the NPD. As an alternative, Milbradt said there was no reason “for hectic activity.... Opening up the borders just means delivering more votes to the NPD. One cannot simply say people are needed in Frankfurt-Main, therefore the liberalisation (of the labour market) must be introduced; at the same time, leaving those in the border regions to their own devices.” Milbradt declared that he had reached agreement on this issue with other eastern German state prime ministers.

With an eye to his international partners and business contacts, Milbradt condemned the recent violence in Mügeln. The fact remains, however, that it is his own economic and political priorities—supported by his allies in the SPD and Left Party—that have created the conditions for the increasing influence of extreme-right organisations in Saxony, and such appalling attacks as that of last Sunday.



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