

German politicians deny responsibility for racist attack

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31 August 2007

Leading members of the German grand coalition government (Social Democratic Party, Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union) have reacted to the recent assault on Indian citizens by a drunken mob in the east German town of Mügeln with a mixture of hypocrisy and denial.

In unison, they claim that such outbreaks of backwardness have nothing to do with their own political and social policies. Instead, they have criticised the German population for its “xenophobia” and made pious calls for citizens to exercise more “civic courage.”

In the early morning hours of Sunday, August 19, eight Indians, attending a street festival in the small town of Mügeln, some 50 kilometres south of Leipzig, were brutally attacked by a mob of fifty youth chanting nationalist and racist slogans.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) condemned the events in Mügeln as an “extraordinarily distressing and shameful incident,” which had been “noted very carefully” abroad and could damage Germany’s international standing.

According to Merkel, the fight against right-wing extremism could not be limited to providing more money for social and cultural programmes. Instead, every individual citizen was called upon to intervene and “show something like personal courage.”

Merkel was backed by CDU General Secretary Ronald Pofalla, who echoed the chancellor. “We don’t need more money, but more civic courage,” he told the *Ostsee-Zeitung*.

The premier of the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt, Wolfgang Böhmer (CDU), said Germany was underestimating the extent of the influence of the far-right in the east of the country, and told the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, “There is an xenophobic mood among at least part of the population.”

According to a despairing commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the attack in Mügeln confirmed how deep-rooted was the “the fear of the strange” and “the spread of authoritarian thinking” amongst the German people.

Leaders of the Green Party also condemned the violence, while the head of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Michael Sommer, called for a “revolt of the decent,” i.e., a revival of toothless, government-led protests such as those which followed prior attacks on foreigners.

While there is no direct evidence of the involvement of the ultra-right German National Party (NPD) in the events of August 19, both the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Kurt Beck, and SPD Interior Ministry expert, Dieter Wiefelspütz, reacted to the events in Mügeln by calling for a ban on the party, which has expanded its activities in the east of the country in recent years.

A previous attempt to ban the NPD in 2003 was thrown out by the German courts when it was revealed that massive infiltration of the neo-fascist organisation by state agents made any ban on the party untenable. Bans on extreme-right organisations in Germany have traditionally been proposed by conservative politicians intent on building up the powers of the state to deal with any opposition—particularly from the left—to the

government.

The reaction by leading political circles and media outlets to the events in Mügeln are thoroughly hypocritical. Any sober analysis of the 17 years since the reunification of Germany in 1990 makes clear that the chief responsibility for the spread of nationalist and racist sentiments rests with the country’s main political parties. In order to divert attention from the social consequences of its own policies, the German government has repeatedly launched xenophobic campaigns, only to blame the population as a whole when outbursts of racist violence take place.

The incitement of nationalism was from the outset a hallmark of the introduction of capitalism into former East Germany. Already in 1989 a coalition of West German political figures collaborated with elements from the Stalinist bureaucracy in East Germany to divert pro-democracy demonstrations against the East German regime into German nationalist channels.

The centre of this campaign was the state of Saxony. At the Monday protest demonstrations held in Leipzig in 1989, flags of the Federal Republic (West Germany) began to appear, and, with the support of leading members of the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED) of East Germany, which later became the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the original slogan of the demonstrators, “We are the People,” gave way to the nationalist slogan “We are One People.”

Since reunification, successive German governments have repeatedly launched xenophobic campaigns in response to social unrest. Both the CDU-led government of Helmut Kohl and its successor, the SPD-Green coalition (1997-2005), systematically curtailed the right of immigration and asylum laid down in Germany’s post war constitution.

Border controls were fortified to prevent immigrants entering the country, with the result that more lives of foreigners have been lost on the German border than the total number of victims of right-wing violence in Germany itself.

The continuous attacks on the rights of immigrants, combined with xenophobic propaganda from the government, formed the background to the racist attacks in the western German cities of Mölln (1992) and Solingen (1993), which resulted in the deaths of entire Turkish families. Then, as now, German politicians washed their hands of any responsibility for the cultivation of nationalist and racist sentiments. They sought to divert widespread popular revulsion and opposition to the attacks by means of harmless candle-light demonstrations, held under the slogans of “unity of all democrats” and a “revolt by the decent.”

Politicians from both the SPD and CDU have repeatedly translated the basic demand of the extreme right for an end to immigration, under the slogan “the boat is full,” into phrases more appropriate for German parliamentarians. Former SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily declared that new immigrants to Germany were no longer welcome, announcing that “maximum capacity has been reached,” while the former leader of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) parliamentary group, Friedrich Merz, proclaimed in 2001: “We must

regulate immigration in accordance with the interests of the state, not in the interests of the immigrants....There cannot be a legal claim to immigration.”

Merz was also a leading initiator of the campaign for a so-called “German guiding culture,” aimed at rehabilitating German nationalism. Following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, supporters of Merz’s campaign were quick to identify Islamism as the new “foreign danger” which threatened “German identity.”

While appealing for more “civic courage” on the part of the population, Germany’s politicians choose to turn a blind eye to the way in which the judiciary and police work to undermine any effective struggle against the influence of right-wing extremists.

A number of organisations and many young people have repeatedly protested and campaigned against racial injustice and the violence of the extreme right, only to witness the courts handing down scandalously lenient sentences against right-wingers or policemen found guilty of crimes against immigrants and asylum seekers. At the same time, those organisations active against racism are starved of the funds they need to function effectively.

Rather than any sort of endemic xenophobia amongst the German people, it is the deliberate encouragement of racist and nationalist prejudices by the ruling German elite, combined with increasing poverty, that has created fertile ground for cultural backwardness and the growth of extreme right organisations, which seek demagogically to exploit growing social equality.

A report issued by the Saxony government in 2006 gives some idea of the social devastation in this former East German state arising from government policy.

In 2005, one eighth of the population of Saxony was dependent on the Hartz IV and social welfare payments introduced by the former SPD-Green Party coalition government. Total unemployment in the state in 2005 stood at 420,000, i.e., one fifth of the population. In some small towns and villages, the figure is nearly double the state-wide level.

At the same time, tens of thousands of workers are employed in low-wage jobs—the so-called second job market (in 2007, at least 36,000). As a result, poverty is not limited to the families of the unemployed. The report by the government of Saxony revealed that 24 percent of households in the state were living in poverty—compared to a national rate of 15 percent.

While poverty levels are rising both in Saxony and in Germany as a whole, the poverty rate in Saxony has been rising at a more rapid pace since the end of the 1990s. The relentless offensive against jobs and working conditions in the state has been matched by the closure of social and welfare facilities for the population as a whole, and for young people in particular.

Such economic conditions are entirely relevant to outbreaks of violence such as that which occurred in the town of Mügeln. Recent German press reports investigating the incident reveal that one of the principal figures involved in the violence was a 17-year-old German youth who is one of five children of a single-parent family surviving on social welfare.

While smug, self-satisfied politicians, including Chancellor Merkel, piously call for more “civic courage” and declare that money alone will not solve the problems in eastern Germany, the fact remains that their own economic policies have resulted in a huge transfer of wealth from working and socially disadvantaged people to an economically privileged elite.

This process is not restricted to the east of the country. Under the former SPD-Green coalition government, social and welfare cuts were implemented across the country, together with a massive assault on wages and jobs, on a scale previously unknown in post-war Germany. A fundamental truth revealed by these bitter experiences is that the overriding division in Germany is not between east and west, but rather between the capitalist class and the working class.

Any examination of the role of Germany’s political parties in the

growth of poverty and the promotion of nationalism would be incomplete without examining the role of the Left Party, formed through a merger of the PDS and the Election Alternative group.

Leading members of the Left Party have also condemned the violence in Mügeln and attempted to wash their hands of any responsibility by maintaining that their party is not in power in the state of Saxony. However, in other eastern German states such as Berlin and, up until recently, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, the Left Party has played a leading role in dismantling local services and attacking jobs and wages. It therefore shares responsibility for the social consequences.

In fact, the state organisation of the Left Party in Saxony constitutes the right wing of the party as a whole. It has always sought to demonstrate its credentials as a “responsible” party and appealed for a better deal for eastern German small business interests.

In the early 1990s, a leading figure in the Dresden PDS, Christine Ostrowski, sought to mobilise the same social layers that are now being cultivated by the far-right NPD. Ostrowski called for the building of an East German party, in the mould of the conservative regional party of Bavaria, the CSU, based on “indigenous small business.” She called as well for a dialogue between the PDS and extreme-right parties.

While the PDS-Left Party has until now been denied a role in the Saxony state government, a number of its representatives cooperate at a local level with both SPD and CDU mayors and community leaders in implementing social and welfare cuts. The party leadership also made clear earlier this year that it is willing to take the place of the SPD in the current state coalition and “tolerate” a CDU minority government.

In order to demonstrate its reliability as an ally of the conservative right, half of the Left Party parliamentary fraction in Dresden voted this year in favour of a coalition government motion for the sale of state-owned housing stock to the US speculator Fortress, which soon after imposed a 15 percent increase in rents.

Just as Germany’s main political parties have repeatedly played the national chauvinist card to head off social opposition, the same reflex can be seen at work in the Left Party. At the peak of mass demonstrations in eastern Germany in 2004 against the SPD-Green Party’s despised Hartz IV attacks on social welfare, the leading figure in the Left Party, former SPD Chairman Oscar Lafontaine, used the market place in Leipzig to deliver an attack on foreign workers.

Speaking at a demonstration opposed to the coalition’s social policies, and with an eye to the state’s borders with Poland and the Czech Republic, Lafontaine declared it was the state’s duty to protect German fathers and mothers from having their jobs taken by foreign workers. Lafontaine’s statement was no slip of the tongue. In his most recent book, he refers to “forced immigration” supposedly shoved down the nation’s throat by Germany’s elite, and declares his aim of withdrawing citizenship from all those who “don’t speak the German language, don’t pay their share of taxes or help finance the social state.”

While official German political circles admonish the German population for its alleged xenophobia, it is the explosive combination of social devastation and nationalist politics propagated since reunification by the German elite—both the conservative right and the official left—which has created fertile soil for the growth of right-wing radicalism and outbursts such as that which took place in Mügeln.

Recent polls have revealed that far from succumbing to “xenophobic sentiments,” the German population is extremely concerned over the growth of social inequality, and is moving to the left. The reaction of the German political establishment to such a development is to divert attention from its economic policies by demonising certain communities, such as the country’s Islamic minority or workers from Eastern Europe, while increasing the police powers of the state. This is the real significance of the call by Kurt Beck and others for increased state powers to deal with the extreme right.



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