

Koch stokes the flames of racism

## German state premier campaigns against “foreign criminals”

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Broad sections of the German population have not yet forgotten the images of the burning homes of asylum seekers just a few years ago. And six months have not yet passed since the attack against a group of Indian immigrants by right-wing thugs in the small German town of Mügeln. Attacks by neo-Nazis and right-wing skinheads against foreigners, asylum seekers and left-wing youth are a daily occurrence in Germany.

This is the backdrop to the latest attempts by the state minister of Hesse, Roland Koch, of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and other Union politicians to stoke up racist sentiments. Their demands for harsher penalties and accelerated deportations of convicted foreigners have provided further support for the extreme right with its own slogan of “foreigners out.”

The occasion for this latest official racist campaign was the attack by two young men (one Greek, one Turkish) on a pensioner in a Munich subway station just before Christmas. Since the attack, CDU politicians—above all, Koch—have competed with each other to demand harsher penalties against young offenders and quicker deportations of foreigners.

Koch, who is currently campaigning for state elections to be held in Hesse on January 27, is leading the charge. On the day after the attack in Munich, he told the right-wing tabloid *Bild* newspaper that there were “too many foreign criminals” in Germany. On Wednesday last week, he presented a six-point programme, which includes a proposal for the rapid deportation of “foreign criminals.” The programme further calls for deportation to occur whenever a foreigner has been sentenced to one year or more. Koch also proposed a so-called “warning arrest”—i.e., a form of “zero tolerance”—involving punitive sentences for petty offences. Koch remarked that young offenders should experience early on what “prison was like from the inside.”

Koch’s programme also demanded the application of juvenile law for young adults between 18 and 21 years to be dropped in favour of laws applying to adults. In addition, Koch announced that the maximum sentence for juveniles should be increased from 10 to 15 years.

Koch demanded that all foreigners have more respect for “German values.” Employing sickening jargon reminiscent of the Nazis, Koch urged a return to traditional values such as modesty, discipline, diligence, order and sense of duty. At the same time, he implied that all foreigners living in Germany who “slaughter

[animals] in the kitchen,” are not able to identify with these values. In the beginning of December last year, Koch attempted to stoke up anti-Islamist sentiments when he demanded that those wearing the Islamic burqa, the full-body robe worn by women, be prohibited in schools. This was despite the fact that a burqa has not been seen in any school in Hesse.

Koch’s latest racist outbursts have come on the heels of declining ratings for the CDU in opinion polls. When Koch first came to office in 1999, he did so by mobilising racist forces to petition against dual citizenship in a similar chauvinist campaign.

The CDU’s poor poll results are linked to the growing opposition within the population to the developing social catastrophe in Germany. For weeks now, the media has been dominated by reports about the growing social inequality in the country. In December, *Der Spiegel* reported on the rapidly growing pauperisation of the bottom end of society.

The magazine wrote: “The income of the poorest layers have decreased by 13 percent compared to 1992, accounting for inflation. At the same time, the highest earners increased their incomes in the same period by nearly one third. While the richest 10 percent of the population own over 60 percent of real estate, shares and savings, the poorest sections typically have nothing, apart from debts.” It added: “This development is frightening.”

An unprecedented redistribution of social wealth has occurred during recent years, first under the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party federal coalition government and now under the CDU/Christian Social Union-SPD grand coalition. Poverty in Germany now stands at the highest level since the end of the Second World War. The policies of successive governments have been accompanied by an offensive by German companies against workers. Job cuts and falling wages have reached unprecedented levels, while at the same time a vast cheap wage sector has been created.

The disgust felt by the population about these blatant injustices is expressed, albeit in a distorted fashion, in the present debate over the introduction of a minimum wage. In light of its own declining electoral support, the SPD has felt compelled to take up this cause, without of course making any mention of its own role over the last 10 years in cutting wages.

The minimum wage demand has found large support within the population. Koch, however, is a bitter opponent of such a move, as

well as any other kind of concession to workers. Indeed, he is an open representative of neo-liberal, pro-business and anti-social policies.

With his conscious and selective attack against foreigners, which has since received majority support from his CDU and CSU colleagues, Koch is attempting to speak to the most backward sections of the population and mobilise them on the basis of racist sentiments. His aim is to distract attention away from those who are really guilty for the current social crisis and to channel social opposition into racist channels.

Foreign youth are being made scapegoats for the catastrophic policies of the state and federal governments that have exclusively served the minority interests of those at the top of society. This is politically criminal.

It is obvious that violent acts carried out by the poorer and more oppressed layers of youth—many of whom come from immigrant families—are linked to the social misery resulting from the policies of the SPD, Greens, CDU and CSU. Susanne Gaschke, writing in the weekly *Die Zeit* newspaper, admitted that juvenile criminal acts “are not a foreigner problem, but one of the underclass.” This so-called “underclass” has grown dramatically in the last 10 years, thanks to the policies of the major political parties. The SPD-Green coalition government laid the foundations with its series of Hartz laws that drastically cut welfare services and payments.

As with his campaign against dual citizenship, Koch is only able to go on the offensive once more because no one is seriously opposing him. He is receiving broad support from the ranks of the CDU /CSU, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU). Merkel explained that the establishment of boot camps could be a useful option for criminal punishment. She requested and has since held discussions with the SPD over harsher punishments for youth.

The chairman of the Union fraction in the German parliament, Volker Kauder, said it was time to put an end to “integration nonsense” and “multicultural massaging.” The general secretary of the CDU, Christine Haderthauer, gave her backing to Koch’s proposal for easier ways to deport foreign criminals. She told the ZDF national TV broadcaster: “We cannot have a situation where we simply look on and attempt to deal with such brutal acts with a perspective of education and soft pedaling.”

As for the SPD, the claims of its leading candidate in the Hesse elections, Andrea Ypsilanti, that Koch is carrying out a “dirty campaign” are utterly insincere. The previous SPD-Green federal coalition government introduced laws to make it much more difficult for immigrants to enter and remain in Germany. Today, the SPD-Union coalition is continuing to dismantle democratic rights and even abolish them altogether. These measures are first being tested on refugees and foreigners, before being applied to the rest of the population.

The Left Party is also no innocent observer. In 1993, its leader, Oskar Lafontaine, then a member of the SPD, was responsible for pushing through the party’s proposal to abolish the right to asylum. At the time, this measure was once again prepared by a campaign against refugees. *Der Spiegel* carried the following headline: “Immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers—the stampede of the poor,” depicting people on an overcrowded boat. Later, as Lafontaine switched to the Left Party, he campaigned in a right-

wing populist manner against “foreign workers” from Poland.

Koch’s racist campaign also has the backing of sections of the media. Ursula Weidenfeld, an editor at the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper in Berlin, commented: “Roland Koch is taking up the cause of the right-wing of the CDU—exactly like he did in 1999 with his campaign against dual citizenship.” She wrote how the CDU had neglected and forgotten its national-conservative side since the death of CDU leader Alfred Dregger. It has allowed “the political homeless to be drawn to the extreme right and extreme left.” From this perspective, Koch’s arguments are “not simply unethical,” she wrote.

Weidenfeld continued: “This is just as necessary as the search for a long-term strategy to keep and integrate the conservative fringe of the CDU within the Union.”

*Tagesspiegel* is of the opinion that one has to appease the right wing by adopting its policies. The precise nature of this “conservative fringe” was clearly shown by former CDU parliamentarian Martin Hohmann. On October 3, 2003, the Day of German Unity, he delivered a speech in his local constituency in Hesse in which he unabashedly drew upon the propaganda reservoir of Hitler and Goebbels. More than one third of his speech regurgitated the National Socialist cliché of “Jewish Bolshevism.”

Hohmann was subsequently forced to quit the CDU. His was not, however, an isolated case. Koch is known to maintain close contact to this extreme right-wing circle, both within and outside the Union.

Koch, as well as those who openly support him or decide not to oppose him, share responsibility the next time right-wing thugs are encouraged to attack foreigners. The lessons of Hitler’s rise to power on January 30, exactly 75 years ago, are of burning significance today.



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