

German chancellor's austerity measures recall the Weimar Republic

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The €80 billion austerity package announced last weekend by the German government, calling for brutal attacks on the poor, has triggered outrage and shock in wide sections of the population.

Many feel that the cuts targeting the unemployed, the ending of the child allowance for those on welfare, the abolition of the heating subsidy for those on housing benefits, and the cancellation of pension insurance contributions for the long-term unemployed are profoundly antisocial, unjust and cowardly. Meanwhile, the banks, speculators and those responsible for the crisis remain unscathed and dictate the cuts in social spending.

The provocative character of the policy is calculated. The attack on the weakest members of society is not just the result of the pathological high-handedness and arrogance of Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Guido Westerwelle and the efforts of Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) to save her ailing government coalition. The significance of the austerity package is more fundamental and far-reaching than that.

It means that the ruling elite have decided to place the entire burden of the financial and economic crisis on the backs of ordinary people. This cannot be done without a major confrontation and is, in the end, incompatible with the maintenance of democratic structures.

These events are reminiscent of the final years of the Weimar Republic. Then, as now, the ruling class exploited the world economic crisis in order to enrich itself beyond measure. And as with Merkel's austerity measures today, it was claimed that there was no alternative to the emergency decrees of the Brüning government. In the end, popular resistance was suppressed by fascist terror and dictatorship.

The Merkel government is opening up a new stage of class struggle with its cowardly attack on the most vulnerable members of society. The policy of social mediation, which the German bourgeoisie adopted following the tragedy of Weimar and the catastrophic outcome of Nazism, is irrevocably over.

The working class cannot avoid a confrontation. It must

prepare for great class battles. This makes necessary a relentless and thorough political accounting.

Merkel, Westerwelle, Deutsche Bank CEO Josef Ackermann, etc., are well aware that the vast majority of the population rejects their anti-social politics. The elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in early May, which dealt a severe blow to the CDU and FDP, showed this clearly.

That these policies, which have been rejected by the voters, are being continued in an even more aggressive form demonstrates that the ruling elite takes no heed of the will of the populace. The government's €80 billion cuts programme represents an attack on democracy and a step towards authoritarian forms of rule.

It is of a piece with the austerity policies being announced by governments across Europe—Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Hungary, Romania, etc.—all of which are doing the bidding of the international financial mafia.

The Merkel government, like its counterparts throughout Europe, is relying on the tacit support of all the parliamentary parties and working closely with the unions. The current outcry by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the unions is a political charade. The calls for protests and resistance from Willy Brandt Haus (SPD headquarters), Karl Liebknecht Haus (Left Party headquarters) and the trade unions are pure hypocrisy. They are intended to prevent the development of an independent movement that breaks free of the grip of the unions and the SPD.

No one should allow his anger against Merkel and Westerwelle to make him fall for the demagogic speeches of the trade union bureaucrats. It is necessary to keep a cool head and look political facts soberly in the eye.

Merkel's austerity measures take up where the SPD-Green Party government under Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens) left off five years ago. The biggest attacks on the welfare state took place under that government. Its Agenda 2010 welfare and labour "reforms" established a huge low-wage sector. Many who had worked for decades and paid into the unemployment insurance

scheme were rapidly moved onto welfare and driven into abject poverty.

The budget deficit, which is cited as grounds for the cuts, did not fall from the sky. It is, in the first place, the result of the repeated lowering of corporate taxes and the top tax rates by the SPD-Green government. The German public expenditure quota, i.e., the share of the gross domestic product that flows into federal, state and local budgets as well as the social security system, has fallen since the mid-1990s from 50 percent to 44 percent—that is, below the level of the UK.

Soaring state debts are, secondly, the result of the bailout packages, totalling more than a trillion euros, which the government handed the banks and speculators, with the approval of the SPD and Greens, in order to save them and the euro from collapse.

The decision of the SPD and the Greens to nominate Joachim Gauck, an avowed anti-communist and former federal commissioner for Stasi documents, as a candidate for federal president is another political signal. The SPD and the Greens want to make it clear that they have no serious political differences with Merkel, who delivered an enthusiastic speech in January to mark Gauck's 70th birthday.

The SPD and the Greens agree with Merkel that harsh austerity measures are necessary. Their criticism is not whether they should be implemented, but how. They believe the Merkel-Westerwelle coalition is too weak and too inexperienced to withstand the expected pressures from below. If drastic cuts need carrying out, they should be made by the SPD experts in social cruelty, runs the social democratic credo.

The attitude of the unions is quite similar. Their officials are frequent visitors to the chancellery. Just a few weeks ago, the delegates attending the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) congress enthusiastically applauded the chancellor. As in the 1930s, the unions are responding to the economic crisis by moving closer to the state apparatus and partially merging with it.

The DGB bureaucrats regard their main task as ensuring the maintenance of bourgeois order. While the employers and the government have declared war on the working class, the unions are doing everything possible to hold back the workers, limiting them to harmless protests and seeking to block any independent mobilization.

A particularly nasty role is played by the Left Party, which is closely connected with the trade union bureaucracy. The warning of parliamentary party leader Gregor Gysi that Merkel's austerity measures are endangering the social peace in Germany is characteristic.

When the German Democratic Republic (East Germany,

GDR) still existed, the apparatus of the Left Party's predecessor was used to secure the power of the ruling bureaucracy in the name of preserving social peace. Now they offer themselves as experts in controlling the working class.

Rarely has there been a party that is as dishonest as the Left Party. While it protests against the social cuts, wherever it sits in government—as in the Berlin Senate, the state government in Brandenburg, and many (mostly east German) local authorities—it enforces social cuts with particular harshness.

The attitude of the Left Party was similar when it came to the government's bank rescue packages. First, it approved the use of expedited parliamentary procedures, signalling its support. Then it voted against the substantive motion implementing the rescue measures because it knew that its votes were no longer needed to secure a majority.

There is one important lesson from the tragedy of Weimar: If these opportunist politics are not challenged, a political disaster is inevitable.

Workers must not let themselves be lulled by the demagogic speeches of the trade union bureaucrats, their defenders in the Left Party and its petty-bourgeois apologists. Workers need a new party that tackles the problem at its root.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), are fighting for an international socialist programme that focuses on the expropriation of the banks and big corporations. Only on this basis is it possible to break the dictatorship of finance capital and establish a workers government that proceeds from the needs of the population, not the profit interests of big business.

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