

The German Love Parade disaster: Not a tragic accident, but a crime

Ulrich Rippert
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“This was not a tragic accident, but a crime.” These were the words used by Marek Lieberberg, one of Germany’s most experienced event organizers, when speaking to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about the recent disaster at the techno music festival in Duisburg. He accused the Duisburg organizers of the Love Parade of “money-grubbing and incompetence.”

Four days after the Love Parade had witnessed 21 largely youthful participants killed, over 500 injured, some seriously, and tens of thousands frightened to death, there can be no doubt that the disaster was not only predictable but to a degree inevitable.

Numerous eyewitness testimonies indicate that the organizers and those politically responsible ruthlessly disregarded the concerns and warnings raised by experts. They reveal an organizer who regarded this major event with hundreds of thousands of participants solely from the perspective of advertising effectiveness and the profitability of their own company, the fitness chain McFit. Added to this was a municipal authority that with bureaucratic arrogance ignored laws, safety standards and urgent warnings because it regarded this mega-event as a project to boost the region’s image and “attract young people to the area, bringing money to cash strapped local authorities.” (*Der Spiegel*)

The irresponsibility is not limited to the technical preparations—the selection of a completely fenced-in event site with a capacity of only 250,000 instead of the expected one million visitors; the use of a single entrance and exit route through a 120-meter-long tunnel, in which the entry and exit routes were not even separated; the abandonment of elementary security measures such as escape routes of the prescribed width and fire plans, all on cost grounds.

Experts and officials who warned of the dangers were systematically intimidated and put under pressure. For example, Thomas Mahlberg, Duisburg chairman of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had asked a year ago in an open letter to the interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia for the removal of the Duisburg police Chief Rolf Cebín because he had spoken against the Love Parade

on security grounds. Cebín’s actions drew “negative press” throughout Germany, according to Mahlberg, who asked that “Duisburg be rid of a heavy burden.” Although Cebín remained in office for a few months, he has now been retired on age grounds.

After the Love Parade was cancelled last year in Bochum for security reasons, those responsible were under tremendous pressure to hold the mass event this year. The event organizer, McFit, which acquired the rights to the Love Parade, had millions invested in an advertising campaign for its fast-growing fitness empire. The politicians of the city of Duisburg and the Ruhr area were concerned with the image of the region. The health and lives of thousands of young people who wanted nothing more than to celebrate a party were ruthlessly put at risk.

The responsibility lies not only with the CDU, which holds the office of mayor in Duisburg, and until two weeks ago led the North Rhine-Westphalia state government, but with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens as well. Insofar as they expressed any objections to the Love Parade, these were only on financial grounds. The supporters of the Love Parade also included North Rhine-Westphalia’s newly incumbent interior minister, Ralf Jäger (SPD), who comes from Duisburg.

As is often the case with such disasters, which appear at first to have unique origins, the state of the society as a whole is reflected in the tragedy in Duisburg. The profound irresponsibility towards hundreds of thousands of mainly young people, with no one showing any concern for their welfare and security, is not limited to Duisburg and the tragic events of last weekend. It characterises large portions of the ruling elite in business, politics and public administration. It is the hallmark of a social system that places the profit interests of the ruling elite far higher than the vital interests and welfare of the vast majority of the population.

Especially in the Ruhr area, once the largest industrial region in Europe, with many coal mines, steel mills and large factories, the social impact of the crisis of capitalist

profit system has been particularly devastating.

The demise of the collieries, in which almost a million miners were employed after the war and which had formed the backbone of Germany's "economic miracle," had already started in the 1950s. At that time, the protests of the Ruhr miners shook the government of Ludwig Erhardt (CDU) and led to the entry of the SPD into the federal government as part of a grand coalition. Through the creation of new industries (such as auto manufacturer Opel), the construction of universities and the extension of the public sector, the SPD and the unions were able to bring the situation under control.

But the decline continued. In the 1970s and 1980s, not only did all the coal mines disappear, steel mills were also shut down one after another. Again there were weeks of strikes, as in Hattingen and the Duisburg district of Rheinhausen, that were eventually sold out by the unions.

The SPD, which governed North Rhine-Westphalia uninterrupted from 1966 to 2005, became specialists in leading the unemployed by the nose. It is no accident that Wolfgang Clement, who as labor minister under Gerhard Schröder pushed through the Hartz welfare "reforms," comes from the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia. Before he moved to Berlin, he was state premier for four years in Düsseldorf.

The arrogance, inhumanity, and bureaucratic ruthlessness with which millions of those on welfare were treated, regarded as mere cost factors to be pushed around, is matched by the irresponsibility shown towards the participants in the Love Parade. The differences between the CDU, Free Democratic Party (FDP), SPD, Greens and the Left Party are merely nuances. None of these parties has a response to the continued decline of the Ruhr area.

This decline has long since adversely affected the infrastructure that was established in the 1970s. Mass unemployment and the impoverishment of the cities and municipalities is palpable everywhere. One austerity programme follows another. Youth clubs, sporting and recreational facilities, district libraries, community colleges, theaters—everything is being closed. The long-term impact of this systematic social decline is no less dramatic and deadly than the events of last weekend.

To counter this social devastation it is necessary to systematically concentrate available resources and establish a programme of public works that would create millions of new jobs and billions in investment in the infrastructure. But none of the major parties are prepared to undertake such a policy. To do so would mean confronting the financial oligarchy, which is creaming off billions and which dictates increasingly tougher austerity measures to the government and the municipalities. Such a confrontation is not desired

by the SPD, the Left Party or the Greens, and certainly not by the CDU and the FDP.

Instead, they conduct campaigns about improving the Ruhr's "image," and other lofty projects, such as building new shopping centers, the organization of major events and expensive advertising campaigns that provide lucrative earnings for a few politicians and their clients. Meanwhile, the mass of the population confront low-wage, temporary jobs and devastated neighborhoods.

Ruhr.2010, with the Ruhr metropolis of Essen as its "European Capital of Culture," has as its slogan: "New energy is being encouraged here. It's called culture." But this has little to do with culture in the traditional sense, as witnessed by the crumbling schools and universities. The Love Parade was part of this "image" campaign, and in the past few years was held in the Ruhr cities of Essen and Dortmund, and was scheduled for 2011 in Gelsenkirchen.

The decay of the official parties is shown by their relationship to the Love Parade festival organizer, McFit President and CEO Rainer Schaller. Whereas the SPD and trade unions had bowed down before the billion-dollar steel concerns in the 1970s, today the Ruhr politicians have put their hopes in Schaller, who came into fast money through the development of cheap fitness studios, Germany's largest chain.

Unlike the 1970s, no major party now is willing to invest money in new universities, public institutions and well-paid jobs. Instead, cuts to the bone and ruthlessness are the order of the day. With the Love Parade disaster, Duisburg has reached the end of the line, but similar disasters are inevitable if society continues in the same direction.

While the drama in Duisburg has drawn the attention and aroused the horror of millions, the little dramas that occur every day in private or in the workplace as a result of unemployment, poverty and government harassment remain largely hidden from the public.

A new political orientation is necessary. This requires the building of a new party that places the interests of society higher than the profit interests of the banks and corporations, and that fights for a socialist program. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the Fourth International, is building such a party.



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