

German chancellor agitates against immigrants

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Two months ago, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor and chair of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), sought to distance herself from the racist positions put forward by then-German Central Bank official Thilo Sarrazin in his book *Germany is Abolishing Itself*. At the time, Merkel declared that Sarrazin's theses were "of little help and counterproductive."

Since then, Merkel has joined Sarrazin's campaign. Last weekend, she told a conference of Christian Democratic youth that multicultural society in Germany was dead. "This multicultural approach has failed, utterly failed," she told the cheering careerists and social climbers present as delegates of the CDU's youth movement.

The chairman of the Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU), Horst Seehofer, went even further and declared that Germany was not a pro-immigration country and there should be no relaxation of its restrictive immigration policy. "We of the CSU," he declared, "are in favour of a German Leitkultur (dominant culture) and oppose multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is dead."

This denial of the right of people of different cultures, religions and national origins to live together on the basis of equality recalls the blackest chapter in German history. In the 1920s, it was not only the Nazis who agitated against "contaminants in the body of the German people," but also conservative sections of the bourgeoisie, including many church dignitaries. By "contaminants" they meant the Jews, who were later relegated to pariah status on the basis of racist laws and ultimately annihilated.

The language has changed. The "body of the German people" has been replaced by "German Leitkultur." Instead of Jews, it is Muslims who are subjected to

discrimination. But the content remains the same. Immigrants who are not prepared to bow before German Leitkultur—whatever that means—are to face penalties or deportation.

The general secretary of the CSU, Alexander Dobrindt, claims that there are "one million people who are not prepared to integrate in Germany." CSU leader Seehofer demands that such immigrants be hit with various penalties—"from fines up to the withdrawal of benefits". Those who hinder "the integration of members of their family" are also to be punished.

These are not empty threats. In the coming week the German cabinet will decide on a law on forced marriages and on those who refuse to "integrate." The issue of forced marriages, which can already be prosecuted under existing law, is raised in order to cover up the reactionary core of the legislation—systematic legal discrimination against those who are already socially marginalized as a result of unemployment, poverty or a lack of language skills.

The debate on immigration and "integration" is even more sinister when one considers that Germany has a higher rate of emigration than immigration. Every year more people leave the country than the number of people who come to live in it. Industry groups are complaining of a lack of skilled labour and demanding access to highly qualified foreign workers.

As for the alleged failure to "integrate," journalists who have interviewed the relevant agencies report that only a tiny percentage of immigrants refuse to attend courses on German language and history. There are far more immigrants seeking to attend German language courses than there are places available. Like many other things, these courses have fallen victim to budget cuts.

So what lies behind Merkel's change of course? Why is the campaign against the supposed "foreign

infiltration” of the country assuming ever more hysterical forms?

Some commentators cite the miserable standing of the CDU in opinion polls. With her crude attacks on immigrants, Merkel is seeking to win back the right wing of her own party, which in recent months has shown signs of defecting. Such commentaries attribute Merkel’s turn entirely to party-tactical considerations.

While this may play a role, explanations which focus on such issues remain superficial. Merkel—and with her a large section of the German ruling elite, including the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—are reacting to fundamental changes in society.

Class tensions throughout Europe have sharpened markedly since the outbreak of the international financial crisis in September 2008. Millions of workers have taken to the streets in Greece, France and Spain to protest the austerity programs imposed by their respective governments.

In Germany, the government has thus far been able to avoid such a confrontation due to the resolute support it has received from the trade unions. But it is only a question of time before that situation changes. Already millions of people who are dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments and on precarious jobs are barely able to make ends meet. In Stuttgart, layers of the middle class, including many former CDU supporters, are in revolt.

Under these conditions, the ruling elite is falling back on tried and true methods. Incapable of providing any way out of the crisis, it seeks to inject the poison of chauvinism and racism into social life.

Merkel, the pastor’s daughter from East Germany, who is always so ready to praise the courage of those who opposed the Stalinist East German regime, has no qualms about borrowing from the arsenal of the Nazis.

Merkel’s chauvinist outburst has international implications. Her attack on other cultures is not just an attack on immigrants at home, but also on Germany’s economic and political rivals on the world stage. It recalls the traditional battle cry of German nationalism: “The German essence will heal the world.”

The German ruling class is intervening in world politics in an increasingly aggressive manner, not hesitating to throw its weight around. The international institutions that made it possible for Germany to combine its expansive economic aims with a relatively

restrained foreign policy are breaking up.

NATO is suffering as a result of its military debacle in Afghanistan and the growing tensions over trade and currency between Europe and the US. Within the European Union, Berlin is insisting on austerity measures that are driving its weaker rivals to ruin, unleashing fierce class struggles, and threatening the very existence of the EU.

Merkel’s campaign against other cultures must be seen as a warning. It is directed against not just foreign workers and their families, but the entire working class. It serves to prepare authoritarian forms of rule and an eruption of militarism and war.

It should be recalled that the anti-Semitism of the Nazis was closely linked to their attack on the workers’ movement. The first concentration camps were set up not for the Jews, but for leaders of the trade unions and the workers’ parties. It was the destruction of the workers’ organizations by the Nazis that paved the way for the Second World War and the Holocaust.



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