

Police action against demonstrators opposing “Stuttgart 21” rail project

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The Baden-Württemberg state government has changed its tactics and is now using excessive force against the opponents of the new railway station in the state capital, the so-called “Stuttgart 21” project. There is no more talk of dialogue. Last Thursday, peaceful demonstrators were confronted by several hundred police officers from all over Germany, using water cannon, tear gas and batons.

At times, Stuttgart’s Castle Park looked more like a scene from a military dictatorship. The police indiscriminately beat people who had assembled for the protest, including underage students and elderly pensioners. According to the organizers, there were several hundred injured. In addition to eye contamination, lacerations, bruises and nausea, there were also broken ribs and concussions. Several victims of the beatings had to be rushed to hospital.

The attack was unprovoked. The claim that demonstrators had earlier thrown stones at the police had to be later withdrawn officially by the Stuttgart Interior Ministry. “We were misinformed”, said a spokeswoman for Interior Minister Heribert Rech (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) on Thursday evening.

The police had even approved a student demonstration that was being held in the vicinity of the park when barriers were erected Thursday morning to fence off an area where trees were to be felled as part of the controversial building project. As word spread that the trees were about to be cut down, the students departed from the planned route, and, like thousands of other Stuttgarters, streamed into the park.

It could have easily been foreseen that the students would move into the park, since the protection of the

300 trees, some over 100 years old, that are to be sacrificed as part of “Stuttgart 21” is one of the central concerns of the opponents of the controversial construction project. So-called “park guardians” had occupied the treetops for days, some of them chaining themselves to the trees.

When some students encircled a police truck carrying the fencing and protesters blocked the access roads, the police moved in. Several hundred marched in and started to shout at the protesters, young and old, pushing them away in order to set up the barriers. Black-clad police officers wearing helmets with their visors down then started hitting people. Water cannon pushed into the park and turned their powerful jets on the so-called “park guardians” to wash them out of the treetops.

According to eyewitnesses, the police sprayed male and female school students with pepper spray and beat them in the face without provocation. The former state chair of the public sector union Verdi, Sybille Stramm, told how, without any prior warning, she was pushed to the ground by police officers, kicked and sprayed with tear gas. On the Internet and on television, images could be seen of blood-soaked demonstrators and shocked participants who had never experienced anything like it.

“I have never before seen such organised beatings,” the *Taz* quoted one observer. Another commented, “Every second, injured people are being carried by here. I don’t know if anything worse could happen in our country.”

The brutal police action was a deliberate provocation, which was carefully planned and prepared by the state government. This is shown by the preceding history and political circumstances under which it took place.

Week after week since the summer, tens of thousands

had peacefully demonstrated against “Stuttgart 21” without it leading to any major incidents. At first, the state government had ignored the protest, hoping it would gradually peter out. Instead, as it grew and more and more people took to the streets, it agreed to a “dialogue”, but without making any substantive concessions. The demand for a building freeze was categorically rejected.

Last Friday, the first discussions were held between proponents and opponents of the project. But since the state and city authorities, together with Deutsche Bahn (the national rail company), continue vigorously to push the project forward, seeking to create a fait accompli, the talks led nowhere.

In reality, the state premier, Stefan Mappus (CDU), has long since decided upon a confrontation course. The 44-year-old faces his first state elections in March 2011, having inherited his post a year ago from Günther Oettinger, who has been appointed a European commissioner in Brussels. As a front man for the conservative wing of the Christian Democrats, Mappus is determined to conduct the campaign on the basis of a firmly law-and-order ticket, making no concessions to the “pressure from the streets”—even if there are many former CDU voters among the demonstrators.

Two weeks ago, Mappus received official backing from CDU leader Angela Merkel. In the budget debate in the Bundestag (federal parliament), Chancellor Merkel expressed her full support for “Stuttgart 21”, saying the Baden-Württemberg state elections next March would be a referendum on the controversial building project. In this way, she linked her own political fate closely to that of Mappus. Confronted with a defeat in the CDU stronghold of Baden-Württemberg, in which the Christian Democrats have held the premiership continuously since 1952, it is unlikely Merkel could survive as party leader and chancellor.

In the same speech, Merkel announced she would re-double her commitment to the goals of the Christian Democratic-Free Democratic Party federal coalition. For months, the media has been accusing her of weakness. Since then, hardly a day has passed without the government launching some new, provocative attack on wide sections of the population, while making economic concessions to big business. The extension of the lifetime of Germany’s nuclear power plants, the

health “reforms” and attacks on welfare benefits are just the most striking examples of this.

The police operation in Stuttgart must be seen in this context. It was supposed to set an example and intimidate not only the opponents of Stuttgart 21, but any opposition to the pro-business course of the federal and the state governments. Mappus is also attempting to exacerbate the confrontation in order to mobilize the far-right dregs that are responsive to his law-and-order policies.

It is quite possible that the police operation was discussed with the chancellor’s office. In any case, it was carefully planned. Otherwise it is impossible to explain why Mappus and his interior minister Rech had requested police reinforcements from Bavaria, Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia, just to clear a small area of the park where some 25 trees are initially to be felled.

While the police were beating students and demonstrators, Mappus was being photographed demonstratively drinking beer at the Stuttgart “Farmers Day” celebrations. Rech said it was the duty of the police to uphold the rights of Deutsche Bahn as the property developers, because “we live under the rule of law”. And the CDU faction leader in the state parliament, Peter Hauck, denounced the demonstrators, saying he was defending himself against “the dictates of former communists and left-wingers, who were the ringleaders of the protests in recent weeks.”



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