German media responds to WikiLeaks revelations with nostalgia for the authoritarian state

Peter Schwarz
9 December 2010

The publication of US State Department internal documents by WikiLeaks has prompted a vociferous response in Germany. With few exceptions, officials and media commentators have echoed Washington's witch-hunting attacks.

The vast majority of journalists and politicians have condemned WikiLeaks and defended secret diplomacy. This is true not only for right-wing and conservative circles, but also for the so-called "liberal press," the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens.

Typical is a guest contribution published December 3 in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* by the leader of the social democratic faction in the European Parliament, Martin Schulz. The author employs a cheap debater's trick, equating the protection of state secrets with the defence of individual privacy.

"We must pose the question," he writes, "what sort of a society do we want—one in which nothing remains private and confidential?" He continues: "Trust, confidentiality and even secrets are part of our private lives. In public life, too, there have to be confidential moments."

The same argument is found in many other commentaries. It implies that keeping secret state accords that have serious, even potentially disastrous implications for millions of people is the same as the confidentiality of personal matters that concern only those directly affected.

The documents published by WikiLeaks do not deal with the personal relationships or affairs of diplomats. As the British historian Timothy Garton Ash wrote in an article for *Der Spiegel*, they give "a clear view of priorities, characters, patterns of thought."

The documents released to date have revealed, among other things, that the United States and its allies are planning military actions against Iran, China and other countries that could easily lead to a third world war and the destruction of mankind.

Anyone repulsed by the lies with which the US justified the 2003 war against Iraq would welcome the publication of the WikiLeaks documents. Not so Schulz. He complains that WikiLeaks acts "not in the public interest" by undermining "the institutions of diplomacy."

Schulz's article culminates with the accusation: "WikiLeaks has not understood the distinction between the interests of the public and the public interest." He thus expresses an understanding of the state that has more to do with the authoritarian Prussian state than with a democracy or a republic.

Under the Hohenzollern monarchy, broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie—including such icons of German liberalism as Friedrich Naumann and Max Weber—defended the rule of the emperor against the democratic parliamentary system. In their eyes, the monarchy was needed to enforce the "public interest"—which included the build-up of the German Navy, the conquest of colonies and the subordination of central Europe to German rule—against the growing influence of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was on the eve of becoming the strongest party in the Reichstag (parliament).

"The monarch, with all his constitutional prerogatives, which in principle are not compatible with a parliamentary regime, offered himself as an ideal instrument to immunise the existing order against democratic currents," writes historian Wolfgang J. Mommsen. (*War der Kaiser an Allem Schuld?—Was the*

© World Socialist Web Site

Emperor to Blame for Everything? Munich: 2002, p. 74)

In posing a contradiction between the public interest and the interests of the public, Schulz rejects democracy. For if all power emanated from the people, as laid down in the German constitution, there could not be such a contradiction. Even for the ancient Romans, the res publica (commonwealth, republic) was identical to the res populi (the people), as Cicero's famous treatise *De re publica* explains.

Schulz expresses the fact that the state has interests other than those of the people and therefore needs secrecy. This is the essence of his attack on WikiLeaks.

"Without confidentiality—no open conversation, less information, and perhaps more wrong decisions," he writes, speaking for many politicians and union officials who plot their deals behind closed doors and trust that they are never exposed to the public. For where would we end up if everyone could read what the chancellor promises to bank managers, what opposition politicians agree to with the government, or trade union leaders with the employers? The existing order would begin to crumble."

Schulz is one of many expressing their ire at WikiLeaks because it has lifted the veil on state secrecy. The Green Party chairman, Cem Özdemir, said on television that by publishing secret diplomatic documents WikiLeaks had "crossed a line that does no good for our democracy as a whole."

Political scientist Herfried Münkler wrote in *Der Spiegel*: "A society without secrets has lost its order." And: "The success of the state is tied crucially to the successful monopolization of political secrecy."

In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Nikolas Richter warned: "The betrayal of secrecy threatens the functioning of foreign policy." In the same newspaper, Stefan Kornelius wrote: "Without confidentiality, no information… If the US president must one day take a decision about Iran's nuclear programme and is pushed to order an air strike, we hope he has reliable advice."

The finance daily *Handelsblatt* worried: "What is shaking US policy will not leave the economy untouched. If Washington's command centre is exposed by secret despatches with seeming ease today, the same can happen tomorrow to General Electric, Siemens, Daimler or Deutsche Bank."

When Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers in 1971 and exposed the American government's lies regarding the Vietnam War, he was awarded numerous honours. The same goes for the journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward who uncovered the Watergate scandal. In contrast, the equally important revelations published by WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange evoke within the political and media establishment near-universal fear, hatred, slander and retaliation.

This shows two things: First, in an age of austerity programmes, bank rescue packages and international military operations, state decisions can no longer be presented openly and defended publicly. More than ever, the rich and powerful rely on secrecy to achieve their political goals.

Second, the media and political establishment have shifted so far to the right that even in liberal circles hardly anyone can be found who will defend democratic rights.

This must serve as a warning to working people. The attacks on wages, benefits and jobs, and the militarization of foreign policy, go hand in hand with attacks on democratic rights and the build-up of authoritarian structures. This can be stopped only by a counteroffensive of the working class based on an international socialist program.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site