

German finance minister attacks immigrant workers

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In an interview with the British *Guardian* newspaper published last Friday, German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble openly joined the swelling ranks of those in the German political establishment and media who have deliberately sought in recent months to scapegoat immigrant workers and blame them for escalating social tensions in Germany.

In the interview Schäuble declared that Germany had made a “mistake” in the 1960s when it permitted the influx of immigrants, in particular unskilled workers from Turkey, into the country. According to Schäuble: “When we decided 50 years ago to invite workers from Turkey, we expected that their children would integrate automatically. But the problems have increased with the third generation, not diminished, therefore we have to change the policy.”

Far from being a mistake, the policy of successive West German governments in the 1960s to open up the country’s labour market was based on the deliberate calculation that young workers from abroad were vitally necessary to carry out arduous forms of labour for low wages under conditions of a pronounced economic upswing.

Schäuble has been an active member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union since 1965 and is well aware of this fact. His outburst of historical revisionism serves contemporary political aims. Anyone familiar with recent political debate inside Germany will recognise that Schäuble’s comments are very similar to those made in August of last year by the prominent social democrat, Berlin Finance Senator and former executive committee member of the German Central Bank (Bundesbank) Thilo Sarrazin.

In his book *Germany Abolishes Itself* Sarrazin used pseudo-biological arguments to declare that immigrant (in particular Turkish and Muslim) workers were socially inferior, of lesser intelligence and an unacceptable burden

on the German economy. In defiance of official studies which point to declining levels of immigration by Turkish workers and the fact that they are less likely to be dependent on the welfare state (or involved in crime) than the native population of Germany, Sarrazin perniciously claimed that “no immigrant group other than Muslims is so strongly connected with claims on the welfare state and crime.”

As longtime Finance Senator in the Berlin SPD-Left Party city government, Sarrazin was responsible for financial policies which led to a huge increase of poverty in the German capital. Berlin currently has the highest levels of child poverty in all of Germany. Having condemned hundreds of thousands of families to misery in Berlin, Sarrazin now seeks to deflect from his own role by blaming immigrant workers and Muslims for growing social tensions in Germany. According to Sarrazin, “The problem is not material but intellectual and moral poverty.”

Now Schäuble is playing the same racist card. As federal Finance Minister Schäuble has been the central advocate of massive austerity programs in Germany and throughout Europe. In Germany Schäuble was the architect of measures agreed by the German government in 2010 aimed at slashing 80 billion euros from the country’s budget over the next four years. Most of these cuts are being made at the expense of the most vulnerable layers in German society.

In Europe Schäuble, on behalf of the German government, is the driving force behind austerity programs throughout the EU, advising one European country after another to slash their budgets and social spending—with disastrous social consequences.

In his interview in the *Guardian* last Friday Schäuble went out of his way to praise the massive spending cuts introduced by the British chancellor of the exchequer George Osborne, which are driving the country into

recession and massively increasing social misery. “What Osborne is doing he’s doing remarkably well and he’s very impressive,” Schäuble declared.

According to Schäuble’s view of the world, Germany made no “mistake” when the government undertook massive bailouts of German banks, costing the population hundreds of billions in new debts and lost revenues. It was also no “mistake” when his government continued the practice of previous administrations, including the coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, by slashing taxes for big businesses and the wealthy.

Instead, for Schäuble, it is immigrant workers and their families, living and working for many decades in Germany, who are the “mistake” and an impermissible drain on the economy.

To fully understand the implications of Schäuble’s comments it is necessary to place them in the context of an unrelenting offensive by leading political figures in Germany and throughout Europe to denigrate Islam and whip up the most vile forms of chauvinism against immigrant workers and their families.

Last year, in the wake of the debate surrounding Sarrazin’s book, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) gave a speech to young conservatives in Potsdam in which she made very similar comments to those now made by her finance minister. Merkel declared in her speech that “the beginning of the 1960s our country called the foreign workers to come to Germany and now they live in our country. ...We said: ‘They won’t stay, they will be gone,’ but this isn’t reality.the approach [to build] a multicultural (society) ... has failed, utterly failed.”

Merkel’s right wing attack on multiculturalism was subsequently taken up by a host of other leading government figures, including the German president, Christian Wulff (CDU). In a speech last year, commemorating 20 years of German reunification, Wulff spoke out against “multicultural illusions.”

Wulff then went on to defend Germany’s (mythical) Christian-Jewish history, but then made a concession to Germany’s largest immigrant community that was regarded as completely intolerable by the right wing in the conservative and social democratic camps. “In the meantime,” Wulff declared, “Islam also belongs to Germany.”

Since making his speech Wulff has come under intense pressure to retract his comments. Only a few weeks ago the new German interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich (CSU), re-ignited the debate by declaring, shortly after taking up his new post, that Islam did not belong in

Germany.

Last weekend it was another leading social democrat, this time former federal finance minister Hans Eichel, who provided yet another platform for Thilo Sarrazin to intervene into the debate and spread his filth. In his function of chair of the political club of the Evangelical Academy Tübingen, Eichel introduced Sarrazin as the main speaker at a three-day conference held under the title: “Does Islam belong to Germany?”

Predictably Sarrazin answered this question in the negative and welcomed the opportunity to repeat his rants against Germany’s Muslim community. Other prominent members of the SPD in attendance at the conference included the right wing mayor of the Berlin suburb of Neukölln, Heinz Buschkowsky.

At the same time the demonisation of Islam and an embrace of the type of racist demagoguery associated with neo-fascist organizations is not restricted to Germany. It is bound up with a political turn being undertaken by the political elite across Europe.

Only a few weeks ago British Prime Minister David Cameron used the occasion of the annual Munich Security Conference in Germany to deliver a diatribe equating Islam with terrorism. The governments in a large number of other European countries, including France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland, have all made Islamophobia a central plank of their political ideology and practice.

German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble is no political novice. His political career in the CDU spans nearly half a century. Thilo Sarrazin is a longtime member of the Social Democratic Party. Both men are fully aware of the consequences of what they say and do. They represent a cabal of leading political figures from across the political spectrum intent on whipping up layers of the bourgeois elite, the media and disoriented middle class forces in a reactionary campaign, which has the potential to create the basis for a new ultra-right wing party in Germany.



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