

UN report hits German social policies

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The government in Berlin comes in for sharp criticism in a United Nations report on the social situation in Germany. The nine-page document on Germany was released last week by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as part of a report it publishes every five years. It includes a sharp, devastating critique of the German government's social policies.

The report records that 13 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and 1.3 million people, although in work, need extra support because their incomes are not enough on which to live. The report draws the conclusion: if such a level of poverty exists in a country like Germany, then it is because its social services are inadequate or there is limited access to them.

Particular concern is expressed in the report regarding child poverty in Germany, affecting some 2.5 million children. The UN committee considers the support provided by the state for poor children to be too low. Statistical studies have shown that 25 percent of students go to school without having eaten breakfast. In many schools, no hot lunchtime meal is provided, threatening large numbers of children with malnutrition and undernourishment.

The report highlights the fact that despite the ruling by Germany's Supreme Court earlier this year that the welfare benefit levels laid down by the so-called Hartz IV laws, and also the support payments for children, were supposedly sufficient, the UN commission did not believe the level of support provided for a reasonable standard of living. It also questioned the method used to calculate the level of Hartz IV benefits.

The committee also notes its continuing concern that the unemployment rate in eastern Germany, 20 years after reunification, is still twice as high as in the west.

The high level of unemployment among those with disabilities is also criticised. Also critiqued is the fact that there are no effective measures to change this situation on the part of the employment agencies, together with a lack of reliable data on the employment situation of disabled people.

Particular criticism is levelled at the discrimination against migrants. The report states that people with an immigrant background, including the second generation, still face serious obstacles if they choose to exercise their rights to education and work. This is mainly due to prevailing prejudices, and, to some extent, ignorance on the part of immigrants of their rights.

Of particular concern is the situation of asylum-seekers, who do not receive adequate social support—not even the inadequate Hartz IV benefit levels—and who often must live in dilapidated and overcrowded accommodation. They are denied the right to work, and access to medical care is only provided in emergencies.

All these conditions, which have existed for decades, violate international conventions, and the UN committee urges the German government to ensure that asylum-seekers have equal access to the contributory social security system, health care and the labour market.

The report also warns against increasing poverty in old age due to declining and low pensions and the inhuman conditions in some nursing homes. The report says the committee is “seriously concerned” that the state has not undertaken sufficient measures to improve the situation for older people in nursing homes. The elderly, according to reports, often live in inhumane conditions and are still receiving insufficient care, due to a lack of qualified personnel and inadequate application of standards of care.

At the beginning of its report, the UN committee expresses deep concern that many of its previous recommendations calling for improvements in social conditions and cultural rights, expressed five and 10 years ago, have still not been implemented. This has led to the sharp criticism in the current report.

While the UN Committee again calls on the government to implement its recommendations on reducing poverty, eliminating discrimination and ensuring the provision of full democratic rights for all people living in Germany, Berlin has brushed off the criticism expressed in the UN report.

A statement by the Ministry for Social Affairs (led by

the Christian Democrat Ursula von der Leyen) said that the report was “largely incomprehensible and not supported by scientific facts”.

That is false on its face. The figures quoted by the UN commission are backed up by countless studies and reports. Almost every month there are new studies on the growing gulf between the rich and poor, and the extremely difficult conditions facing people who earn very little or who have been unemployed for a long time and live in poverty.

The figures mentioned by the UN report are based on official reports and studies, and in some cases have been overtaken by reality.

At the beginning of this month, new figures were published on pensions and pensioner poverty. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, in the period from 2001 to 2010, pensions grew only by 0.82 percent per year on average, while the average inflation rate stood at 1.36 percent, and is rising.

Currently, about 400,000 people over 65 are dependent on the state for social assistance. It can be anticipated that the huge low-wage sector, which has been created in recent years, providing insecure, temporary working with intermittent spells of unemployment, has increased the number of older people at risk of poverty. It is not uncommon to see old people afflicted by poverty searching the trash bins in city centres or at railway stations for something of use or to eat.

This development has not occurred by chance or because various federal governments have not followed the recommendations of the UN in recent years or those of other social organisations and poverty researchers. This development was a conscious political aim and has been deliberately pursued.

Seven years ago, the Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition government introduced the Hartz IV regulations against massive protests in the population, with the full intention of establishing a low-wage sector and precarious jobs. This was achieved by the new rules, which mean that after a year of unemployment at the most, the pressure is immense to accept any kind of work or run the risk of losing all social support.

The actions of several governments in recent years, introducing a so-called “sustainability factor”, have continuously lowered pensions and raised the retirement age to 67. For those who are not able to work until they are 67 this equates to a further cut in their pension.

Although unemployment has fallen officially in recent months to below 3 million, the long-term unemployed and

those in poor health struggle to find a job. Budget cuts mean that support and retraining for these people has fallen victim to the austerity measures. For example, the federal Ministry of Labour is cutting back some 40 percent of spending on workforce integration assistance by 2014. This corresponds to about €2.7 billion in cuts.

In Germany, as in all other countries, after the outbreak of the international financial and economic crisis in 2008, the government shelled out hundreds of billions of euros to save the banks and financial institutions that were in danger of collapse. But there is no money when it comes to social and cultural spending, education and health.

Further sharp cuts and austerity measures in all these areas have been announced or are already being implemented. All the social gains and rights fought for the working class in recent decades are at stake.

Those who are benefiting from this situation are also known. It is the rich and super-rich all over the world, who, despite the sharpest international economic crisis since the 1930s, are benefiting from the redistribution of social wealth from the bottom of society to those at the top.

According to the “World Wealth Report”, the assets of the wealthy in 2010 rose by almost 1 percent to a record high of \$42.7 trillion. Their wealth has even exceeded the peak of \$40.7 trillion reached in 2007 before the financial crisis. In Germany there are 924,000 millionaires, according to the study—an increase of 7.2 percent. Among the super-rich in Germany there are 839 households with wealth exceeding \$100 million.



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