

# German army commences recruitment in schools

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In line with the plans to create a full time professional army in Germany, military conscription came to an end on July 1, 2011. This has immediately created a huge problem for the Bundeswehr (federal armed forces).

Only 433 men and women had enrolled by April 1 this year, although 2,000 recruits are needed every quarter year. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper, only 4,000 of 160,000 potential recruits responded to letters enquiring whether they were interested in joining the army—even though such replies would in no way have amounted of a commitment.

The Bundeswehr and defence ministry are responding to this lack of military personnel with a steady militarisation of society. They have initiated an extensive advertising campaign to boost the recruitment of young people, working hand-in-hand with radio, television, the press and other online media, as well as increasing their presence at trade fairs and public festivals.

The Militarisation Information Agency draws attention on its homepage to the “significantly increased expenditure” in this area. The federal defence ministry has developed a comprehensive “package of measures to make service in the armed forces appear more attractive.”

The long-standing practice of organising promotional events with official representatives from the sphere of the school education has also been expanded. The education and culture ministries of eight federal states have recently concluded the appropriate cooperation agreements with the Bundeswehr. The “youth relations officer” in the classroom, “discussing” security and human rights issues with juvenile pupils, is increasingly becoming part of the curriculum.

As acknowledged a few weeks ago, the army has been organising and conducting secret seminars for young people, providing the funding and determining the content, but without officially revealing itself as the actual sponsor.

According to *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the target audiences consist of the so-called “opinion leaders”: “student representatives, student newspaper editors, web editors of school home pages, as well as youth representatives in companies, scouting organisations, sports clubs, political parties, charity groups and churches”—all of whom are seen by the army as “multipliers.” It is supposed that they will pass on the acquired knowledge to others, and thus spread the message throughout the population.

The official organiser of these seminars is the Berlin firm,

Young Leaders Ltd., whose website is full of appeals in a trendy business English, without featuring or mentioning the Bundeswehr even in a rudimentary way. The site thus informs: “We offer a forum to the decision makers of tomorrow and the opportunity to make contact with firms, institutions, scientists, journalists and politicians. The opportunity to exchange views and to build a substantiated opinion”.

The press and information department of the defence ministry has since confirmed not only that it finances the seminars of Young Leaders Ltd., but it also determines their subject matter. Apparently, however, the seminar participants are not informed about this. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* claims that about twelve seminars and four “large youth press conferences” are held annually.

The seminars cover broad-ranging topics and last up to three days. They begin with fairly general social issues about “economics, ethics and the media.” In this context, matters concerning security, foreign policy and the Bundeswehr are then brought into the discussion. In addition to themes such as human dignity, abortion and euthanasia, the issue of Islam is discussed. According to the first-hand experience of one participant, the Bundeswehr itself then takes the stage and “informs us about how safely we live in Germany, and what dangers we can expect to encounter nowadays in the 21st century.”

Remembering the contents of the defence ministry’s 20-page “Defence Policy Guidelines,” in which the invocation of global threat is accompanied by ideas about the “need for national self-assertion,” one realises the seminar discussions are obviously aimed at legitimising the new German defence policy, and especially the current and potential military deployments of the Bundeswehr. The seminars are therefore designed to be very creative in their appeal to young people. Participants produce their own news broadcasts in the form of radio and television spots.

That the army’s responsibility for these seminars was not accidental—as claimed by Stefan Paris, head of the defence ministry’s press and information office—but a deliberately and elaborately kept secret, can be inferred from the Bundeswehr’s own records. Quoting from these, the *Berliner Zeitung* reported that this practice was aimed at winning over the “participants who were sceptical of the military”. To avoid deterring this kind of youngster, the army was quite willing to employ such highly dubious practices.

It is true that the Bundeswehr operates more openly in the

schools. However, similar methods are practised by the full-time officers involved in youth relations and specially trained to conduct “information sessions.”

They are not officially allowed to recruit young people during their visits to the schools. Actual recruitment is the responsibility of military service advisors working outside classroom hours. But this division of duties is extremely ill-defined in practice. The defence ministry’s “package of measures” puts it thus: “In order to promote interest in service in the armed forces, the information sessions will exploit all relevant channels of communication, including opportunities for addressing personal issues.”

Since October 2008, the education and culture ministries of North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Bavaria, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony and Hesse have concluded cooperation accords with the Bundeswehr, which has been officially proclaimed a “partner in education provision.”

In November last year, Hessian Education Minister Dorothea Henzler attempted to justify the Hessian state’s cooperation accord by explaining: “Youth relations officers will primarily discuss security and general human rights issues with the pupils.... By involving the youth relations officers in the classroom, information about foreign and security policy can be conveyed at first hand”.

Youth relations officers and military service advisors communicated with 700,000 pupils in this way over the last year. According to statements by the children’s charity Terre des Hommes, even eleven-year-olds were addressed. This contradicts the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Germany is a signatory.

The defence department’s “package of measures” indicates that the Bundeswehr is increasingly recruiting average and poorly qualified young people and those from immigrant backgrounds for employment in the lower ranks of the professional army and voluntary military service.

Quoting from the measures package document, the *Financial Times Germany* reported: “In view of demographic changes and the forthcoming reorganisation of the Bundeswehr, young people with below-average school education or no school qualifications at all will increasingly be counselled at a personal level”.

Like the US army, the Bundeswehr is deliberately exploiting the precarious social situation of young people. According to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, many young people come to the army, discouraged by their experience on the labour market and bleak prospects of ever finding a job. This is also evident in eastern Germany, where many regions have been devastated by high unemployment and poverty. The Bundeswehr becomes a “sought-after employer” for young people deprived of any prospect for pursuing a livelihood.

The established parties are offering virtually no opposition to the increasing presence of the Bundeswehr in public life and the schools.

The Greens appear to have no problem with the practice. While the Green Party verbally supports mounting protests by pupils and parents against the presence of the Bundeswehr in the schools in Berlin, where elections are due in September, it shows its real

position in Rhineland-Palatinate, where it has shared government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since May 2011.

During the election campaign in the state, the Greens still advocated ending cooperation with the Bundeswehr as a central feature of their anti-war policy. However, nothing remains of this position in the current coalition treaty—the cooperation agreement with the Bundeswehr remains in force. In line with their support of military missions abroad, the Greens also accept a political mandate for the Bundeswehr on the domestic front.

The same criteria apply to the Left Party. Although Berlin has still not entered into any official cooperation with the Bundeswehr, visits of the army to the schools are on the rise. According to figures published by *Junge Welt*, military promotional events were held at 183 schools throughout last year, and the trend was increasing. While individual city council deputies also support verbal protests in Berlin and like to take part in roundtable discussions, Left Party members oppose an official ban on the Bundeswehr in public schools.

The SPD-Left Party city administration even rejected a resolution of a teachers’ and pupils’ conference at the Robert Blum High School, which demanded the expulsion of the military from the school grounds. The city rulers justified their decision in favour of the Bundeswehr as follows: “To resolve on such a course would interfere with the task of individual teachers to present a balanced discussion of security and peace policy issues in the classroom”.

The Left Party likes to promote itself as an anti-war party with comments which invariably turn out be worthless. By continuing its ten-year-long policies of cuts in social services and pauperisation of Berlin residents, it is also preparing the social conditions that will enable the army to recruit more young people.

The German section of the Social Equality Party opposes the policies of the Greens and the Left Party, which conduct themselves in the spirit of the speech delivered by Federal President Christian Wulff at a recent Bundeswehr swearing-in ceremony. Contrary to what Wulff said, the army certainly does not belong “in our midst, in our schools and universities, and in public places.”



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