

Germany: Duisburg's mayor voted out a year and a half after Love Parade disaster

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Duisburg's mayor Adolf Sauerland (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) was forced out of office on Sunday, with nearly 130,000 residents, more than one in three eligible voters, voting for his recall. Only 21,500 voted for him. The voter turnout was 42 percent.

More than one and a half years after the Love Parade electronic dance music festival in July 2010, when 21 mostly young people were crushed to death and many more hundreds injured and traumatised, Sauerland was booted out of his position.

Sauerland continues to deny any responsibility for the suffering of the victims of the Love Parade. Just two weeks ago, he boasted at a CDU event: "Political responsibility? For whom? And by whom? And who else?"

After the city council rejected a motion to dismiss Sauerland last year with the votes of the CDU and the Greens, a change in the law by the Social Democratic Party-Green Party state government under Hannelore Kraft (SPD) enabled a recall as a result of a referendum. To the last, Sauerland was certain the necessary minimum for the recall—25 percent of eligible voters (91,000 votes)—would not be achieved.

Sauerland fully deserves his fate. But you do not have to be a friend of the CDU politician to see that he is being made the scapegoat for social developments that are neither his personal responsibility nor limited to Duisburg, the fifth largest city in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Those responsible—in addition to the organisers—are not only Sauerland and the CDU, but the SPD, Greens and all the other parties on the city council. In 2007, the council voted unanimously to host the Love Parade. They all wanted the event, in order to burnish their image and attract investors to the bankrupt city, unscrupulously shoving to the side all safety concerns.

The supporters of the Love Parade also included North Rhine-Westphalian interior minister Ralf Jäger (SPD), a native of Duisburg, who at the time of the disaster was visiting the police operations centre, and soon after left the Love Parade grounds through the VIP exit.

The organisers of the event, Lopavent, headed by entrepreneur Rainer Schaller, owner of the fitness chain McFit, placed their own profit interests above all else, and Sauerland and the city council subordinated themselves to Schaller. For cost reasons, Lopavent ignored numerous regulations, and the city government and administration closed their eyes.

The Duisburg state prosecutor has stated that none of the "personnel from the building code office was involved on the day at the event site". Meanwhile, an e-mail has surfaced, showing that the absence had been deliberately arranged.

On May 11, 2010—i.e., two and a half months before the event—a city employee wrote that building regulations department head Jürgen Dressler (SPD) and public order department head Wolfgang Rabe (CDU) had agreed not to demand all legal requirements be upheld by the operators of the Love Parade. This would keep the records clean and ensure the city of Duisburg could not be prosecuted. "We would then not be there on the day in order to check on things", said the e-mail.

As often in such disasters, the tragedy in Duisburg expresses and condenses a larger reality. The profound irresponsibility towards hundreds of thousands of mainly young people, in whose welfare and safety no one was interested, characterises large sections of the ruling elite in business, politics and public administration.

In recent decades, the Ruhr area in which Duisburg lies, whose mining and coal industries once made it the largest industrial centre in Europe, has experienced an unparalleled social decline. For decades, this has been presided over and enforced by the SPD, in collaboration with the trade unions.

Meanwhile, one in seven Duisburg residents are dependent on welfare benefits; unemployment is the highest in the state. The social infrastructure of this Ruhr city is being dismantled to guarantee payments to the banks. The president of the city council, Anne Lütkes (Green Party), is scrupulous in ensuring that Duisburg pays back €430 million to the banks over the next four years for "interest and other

financial charges”.

Moreover, while in government, the SPD handed out lucrative positions in the city and the privatised operations to their members, funnelling municipal contracts to their cronies in big business. Nepotism and overt corruption was omnipresent in Duisburg. Accompanying the massive social cuts and general deterioration, voter turnout has fallen steadily since the 1990s.

On this basis, Sauerland was able to win the election in 2004 against the incumbent SPD mayor, Bärbel Zieling. Quite a few people voted for Sauerland because they were tired of the cuts in social spending and the self-serving politics of the Social Democrats.

The result of the election of Mayor Sauerland and a majority for the CDU and the Greens in the city council, who have worked together since 2004, was that the corruption of the SPD was supplemented by that of the Christian Democrats and Greens. Nothing changed as far as the city’s social decline was concerned.

When it comes to pro-business “friendliness”, all the parties are agreed. Recently, the city council unanimously approved the establishment of a retail “outlet centre” in the north of Duisburg. One consequence is that a residential area must make way for a parking lot, and hundreds of tenants, mostly elderly people who have lived there for decades, will have to be relocated. All factions of the city council have declared that the fate of the tenants should not stand in the way of the “economic opportunities” for Duisburg—and the financial interests of the investors.

The SPD and the Greens, with the Left Party in tow, are seeking to take advantage of Sauerland’s behaviour before and after the Love Parade to pick up where they left off in 2004. Following mayoral elections, which must be held in the next six months, they intend to push through further social spending cuts to help repay the banks. Sauerland’s isolation and the resentment he faced meant he would no longer have been able to carry out the attacks.

Seen in this light, the recall of Sauerland is the preparation for an upcoming social assault.

After the Love Parade disaster, the fact that the outrage and anger directed against all those responsible has been subordinated to the SPD is thanks to the civic group “A new beginning for Duisburg”.

Regardless of the motives of many of its members—anger and indignation at the attitude of the organisers and the city—the civic initiative has downplayed the social and political issues from the beginning, insisting that it was all Sauerland’s fault.

The wily social democrat Theo Steegmann rose to become the spokesman for the group on these matters. He has a history worth noting.

Almost 25 years ago, at the end of 1987, Steegmann was the deputy works council chair at the Krupp plant in Duisburg-Rheinhausen. At that time, when Krupp announced the plant’s closure, a mass strike threatened to break out that would have had implications far beyond Duisburg. *Der Spiegel* wrote at the time: “From Rheinhausen, a wildfire could sweep across the whole district”.

That this did not happen was thanks to Steegmann and others. Behind their radical words, focussing on protests against the Krupp group, the real problems that confronted the steel workers were suppressed.

The state government of Johannes Rau and Friedhelm Farthmann (both SPD) had long supported Krupp’s closure of the plant, but officially pledged its support to the steel workers. Months beforehand, in the so-called “Frankfurt Agreement”, the IG Metall union leadership had agreed with the steel companies to job cuts in the industry.

Although this very quickly became public, Steegmann opposed any confrontation with the SPD state government and the IG Metall leadership. The protests proved ineffective, and in 1993, the factory was closed down. The defeat of the Rheinhausen Krupp workers accelerated the cuts in social provisions that followed.

The replacement jobs promised by the union and Krupp never materialised. However, things went better for the bureaucrats on the works council: Walter Bush was hired as a personnel manager at ThyssenKrupp in Bochum, Manfred Bruckschen became an SPD member of the state legislature in Düsseldorf, and Theo Steegmann became a manager of a 100-percent Krupp subsidiary on the old Krupp site.

Steegmann’s company was responsible for providing “qualifications” for some 1,000 long-term unemployed. The content of the training provided was the recycling of old pallets and electrical scrap. According to Steegmann, the fact that many were sent back to the unemployment lines was their own fault: “The people lacked enthusiasm”, he said. “You had to punish people”. After his time as a manager on behalf of Krupp, he studied business education, and is now back working for ThyssenKrupp (Nirosta) as an instructor.

It is people like Steegmann who provide a cover for the SPD, the unions and big business as they undertake to organise wave after wave of social cuts.



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