

The social issues behind the shooting in Karlsruhe, Germany

Ernst Wolff
6 July 2012

A mass shooting took place on the fifth floor of an apartment building in the southwestern German city of Karlsruhe on Wednesday. As officials moved in to evict Bernard K from the apartment owned by his partner, the 53-year old unemployed man shot and killed five people—the bailiff, a locksmith, the new owner, the shooter’s girlfriend and finally himself.

Bernard K. lived with his unemployed girlfriend in the apartment, and on occasion also in Alsace. The woman was the owner of the apartment but was in arrears with her payments. The house had been foreclosed in April this year.

Although little is yet known about the life of the offender the media quickly sought to stress individual motives as the cause of the crime. Bernard K. was described as a weapons fanatic who had planned the deed for a long time.

In such a brutal act certain individual circumstances always play a part, but a reconstruction of the events and their background point to the role of a number of social factors that prompted Bernard K. to react in the way he did.

At about eight o’clock in the morning, a bailiff turned up with a social worker and a locksmith at the home of Bernard K.’s lifelong companion. As the locksmith sought to break into the apartment, Bernard K. opened the door and asked the men to sit down. The bailiff refused and asked Bernard K. to leave the apartment. Bernard K. then ran into the next room, came back with a pistol and shot the bailiff. He told the locksmith to tie up the other two men. The locksmith then tried unsuccessfully to wrest the gun away from Bernard K. who then shot him several times.

After the social worker had talked with the shooter for more than an hour, Bernard K. decided to let him go free at 10:00 a.m. The social worker informed the

police, who then quickly assembled an assault team. When the officers stormed the apartment a little later, Bernard K. and his hostages were already dead in the apartment. Police then found a dummy hand grenade, a loaded rifle, a shotgun, two pistols, and ammunition—sufficient, according to the Karlsruhe chief of police, for the shooter to carry out an “extreme fire fight” with police.

A more extensive examination of the background to the crime indicates that it was primarily the reaction of a man driven to desperation who felt his situation was hopeless. Worn down by years of unemployment, Bernard K. was confronted on Wednesday with the harsh reality of modern social life in Germany.

On that day, Bernard K. was confronted with the new owner coming to claim his property, accompanied by the state in the form of a bailiff. Neither of them appeared to express any interest in the personal circumstances and difficult situation of Bernard K. and his partner.

The Karlsruhe drama is by no means the first of its kind. In December 2011, a 68-year-old man shot and killed the new owner after the forced sale of his apartment in Rastatt (Baden Württemberg). In June 2011, a 30-year-old in Berlin attacked a bailiff, who had rung at his door in the course of an eviction. The tenant was armed with a hatchet. In March 2011, an unemployed man, heavily in debt, stabbed his wife prior to eviction from his apartment in Halle (Saxony-Anhalt).

These incidents and the escalation of violence used is directly linked to the decline in living standards for large segments of the population in Europe’s biggest economies. The development of long-term unemployment, the ballooning of a huge cheap wage sector and the inability of older workers to find any sort

of suitable work, plus the cuts in social welfare, mean that more and more people are not in a position to keep up their payments for their homes and possessions.

In fact, the number of home foreclosures is far exceeded by the number of evictions from rental housing. This usually affects people plunged into unemployment or precarious employment who are then dependent on either Hartz IV welfare payments or having their rent “topped up” by the state. If the authorities deem that the recipient of benefits is living in an apartment with an excessive rent then the response of the state is to kick the tenant out, forcing the tenant to find new accommodations. The number of such households is estimated at 60,000 in Berlin alone.

Prior to eviction tenants are subject to humiliating harassment by landlords or utility companies. Last year, 600,000 households in Germany had their electricity turned off and almost 1.5 million people were denied a basic tenants’ right.

It’s not just the increase in social inequality that lies behind desperate and violent responses such as that of Bernard K. in Karlsruhe. Such incidents are also fuelled by a sense of social isolation and the feeling that none of the official political parties take seriously the plight of a growing sea of poor and despairing citizens.

The huge low-paid sector and attacks on the German welfare system were introduced by the SPD and Greens—two factors that were crucial to the current levels of mass impoverishment. And it was the Left Party in 10 years of government in the state of Berlin that prioritized bank bailouts while selling off broad swathes of the city’s housing stock to property sharks who have driven up rents, leading to a surge of foreclosures and evictions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact