Germany: Fire at workshop for the disabled kills 14

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A fire in a workshop for the disabled killed 14 people in the town of Titisee-Neustadt in the Black Forest state of Baden-Württemberg on ??Monday. The accident is one of the worst such disasters to take place in Germany in recent years.

The fire broke out in a large room on the first floor in the workshop, which is run by the charity organisation Caritas. Gas flowed from a mobile gas-fuelled heater, ignited and exploded. Poisonous fumes and smoke spread quickly.

Thirteen people with disabilities—ten women and three men—and a care attendant died from smoke inhalation. Others made it to the windows where they were rescued with the help of firefighters. When firefighters arrived, many of the workers stood at windows screaming for help. The exit was cut off by a staircase, and many of the disabled were unable to walk and reliant on wheelchairs. Fourteen people suffered injuries, nine of whom were seriously injured.

A total of 111 people were present in the building. They worked in metal and woodworking departments, involved in electrical assembly and packaging, in part for the automotive industry.

Leading German politicians immediately issued their condolences. Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Baden-Württemberg premier Winfried Kretschmann (Green Party), together with Pope Benedict XVI, all expressed their concern and spoke of their “horror, despair and sadness” (Kretschmann). They stressed that every security measure had been taken and that the fire prevention measures in the workshop were quite adequate.

In fact, the building lacked a proper fire extinguishing system. It had no sprinklers which would have immediately dampened the smoke with water. According to the Baden-Württemberg Interior Minister Reinhold Gall (Social Democratic Party-SPD), these elementary safety measures “not required.” Apparently building regulations for a building where disabled people or people with limited mobility live and work do not include the need for a sprinkler system—as is usual for other public buildings such as airports or exhibition halls.

The building where the fire broke out was a new facility, constructed in 2006. The sheltered workshop in Titisee-Neustadt was originally built in 1979, but was fully refurbished six years ago. A new wing was built at the same time. No explanation has yet been given why such a risky form of heater was installed in a new building with its own heating system.

Caritas certainly has enough money to provide adequate fire safeguards in its homes and workshops. The charity is run by the Roman Catholic Church and is the largest private employer in Germany. It employs over half a million full-time employees nationwide, and an equal number of volunteers. It operates approximately twenty-five thousand facilities such as kindergartens, schools, nursing homes, counselling centres and workshops for the disabled.

The so-called “welfare agencies,” including Caritas and the (Protestant) Diakonia, enjoy many privileges. They are subject to virtually no control, enjoy substantial tax privileges, and ban their employees from unionizing. The German business magazine *Business Week* commented recently: “Under the guise of a non-profit they have built up an expansive and ever-changing empire. They continually invent new tasks to be done and the state puts up the money.”

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Only a few weeks ago Caritas employees who had gone on strike took legal action to prevent their sacking by their employers.

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