

German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* faces bankruptcy

Marianne Arens, Ulrich Rippert
5 December 2012

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) filed for bankruptcy in mid-November, facing collapse after nearly 70 years in operation. It is noteworthy and instructive that a paper describing itself as socially liberal or left-wing and pro-union files for bankruptcy at a time when social and political conflicts are sharpening.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* was founded immediately after the Second World War. It was the first newspaper licenced to appear in the American sector, a few weeks after the Allied victory in August 1945. General Roger McClure, the US commander controlling the news media, commissioned three Social Democrats and three members of the Communist Party (KPD), as well as a former member of the Catholic Centre Party, to head its editorial board.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), headed by Kurt Schumacher, adopted an anti-communist policy, leading to disputes within the editorial team; the social-democratic board members relinquished their mandate.

For its part, the KPD advanced a pro-capitalist programme. It disbanded the anti-fascist committees that formed after the collapse of the Third Reich; its post-war founding proclamation advocated “private enterprise on the basis of private property”. Pressure mounted on the KPD at the beginning of the Cold War, however, and the editorial licence of two of its members was revoked; the third, Arno Rudert, was expelled from the KPD due to his association with the US military administration.

A year earlier, however, General Roger McClure had issued a *FR* licence to Karl Gerold, who would play a key role in the paper’s management for two and a half decades. Raised in a social-democratic working class family, he apprenticed as fitter and toolmaker and in 1922, at age 16, joined the Socialist Working Youth, an association of youth organisations of the SPD and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). He denounced the Nazis in anti-fascist publications, and fled to Switzerland when they came to power in 1933.

In Switzerland he met Karl Retzlaw, who fought as a member of the Spartacus League alongside Karl Liebknecht in the November Revolution of 1918-19. Retzlaw became people’s commissar for police and Munich chief of police during the Munich Soviet Republic. Just before its defeat, he destroyed the police files, saving many people from the reactionary terror that followed.

In Switzerland, Retzlaw and Gerold discussed Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition to Stalinism inside the Communist movement. In the autumn of 1933, Retzlaw left the Communist Party and for a

time joined the International Communists of Germany, the German section of the Trotskyist opposition. Gerold never broke with social-democratic politics. After the war, the two met again at the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. From the mid-1950s, Gerold was its sole publisher, editor-in-chief, and majority shareholder of the printing and publishing business; Retzlaw worked as a publishing assistant and headed the works council.

The *Rundschau* became the voice of social-democratic opposition in the Adenauer era. It often exposed former Nazi Party members or supporters, who had found places at all levels of the Federal Republic—in federal and state politics, as well as in business, culture and science.

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) had made the commentator of the Nuremberg racial laws, Hans Globke, head of the federal chancellery. Theodor Oberlander, who directed Hitler’s department of research on Eastern Europe and worked with the army high command, became federal minister for displaced persons, refugees and war victims.

The class struggle intensified in the 1960s. By the winter of 1956-57, the IG Metall union won its campaign for paid sick leave, after a 16-week strike in Schleswig-Holstein. The 1963 metal workers’ strike in Baden-Württemberg went further. Strikers demanded not only higher wages and social improvements; they adopted resolutions against proposed reactionary “emergency laws”. Companies responded by locking out hundreds of thousands of workers, for the first time since 1928. At the same time, miners mobilised against the closure of collieries in the Ruhr.

The ruling class was forced to bring the SPD into the government. During the chancellorship of Kurt Georg Kiesinger (CDU and former Nazi Party member), the SPD’s Willy Brandt served as foreign minister and vice-chancellor. After the CDU-SPD coalition passed the so-called Emergency Laws, a broad extra-parliamentary opposition developed, culminating in the 1968 student revolt. This was followed in 1969 by the September strikes, a wave of spontaneous work stoppages in the metal industries that temporarily escaped the union bureaucracy’s control.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* then pushed for an SPD government, preferably in alliance with the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Hans-Hermann Flach, later to become secretary of the FDP, had been an editor of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* since 1962. The SPD-liberal coalition, which made Willy Brandt chancellor in the autumn of 1969, was prepared in a way in the *FR* editorial

office.

Under Brandt, the *FR* developed into a semi-official government organ. It praised Brandt's call for "more democracy," his new *Ostpolitik*, and his 1970 "knee fall in Warsaw", a genuflection commemorating the Ghetto uprising of 1943, which was hailed as reconciliation with Poland. The *Rundschau's* circulation hit record levels.

The *Rundschau* cheered on Willy Brandt, as the number of jobs for secondary school and college graduates at universities, research institutes, hospitals, schools, social service institutions and in management greatly increased. The welfare state expanded, and the *Frankfurter Rundschau* became the organ of a social-reformist milieu wielding considerable political influence; social partnership and class collaboration were the main themes its commentaries and analyses.

The main aim of Brandt's reforms was to demobilise workers and youth and stabilise bourgeois rule, however. When Brandt passed the so-called "radicals decree" in 1972, barring anyone who questioned the "basic free democratic order" from professional employment, the *Rundschau* promoted this policy, launching an ideological offensive against anti-capitalist tendencies. Any enemy of Marxism was given the chance to spread his or her ideas in the *Rundschau's* pages.

The essays of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse had already been published and discussed in the days of student protests. These theorists of the Frankfurt School drew extremely pessimistic conclusions from the tragedies of the twentieth century and the defeats of the working class. They warned that any movement from below and based on the working population would develop in the direction of right-wing extremism and fascism.

Leading Pabloites such as Ernest Mandel and Jacob Moneta celebrated students as the new agents of social progress and dismissed the role of the working class.

Soviet dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and other ideological forerunners of capitalist restoration were celebrated in *Rundschau* editorials.

When the Greens formed in the late 1970s, and increasingly held the working class responsible for society's problems, the *Rundschau* applauded them. It also enthusiastically greeted the rise of Joschka Fischer from Frankfurt house squatter and street fighter, to the state of Hesse's environment minister, to vice-chancellor and the foreign ministry's leading diplomat.

The *Rundschau's* rightward shift was closely linked with the transformation of the trade unions. In the 1960s and 1970s, they pressured employers to grant some improvements for workers. Today they pressure employees for concessions, wage reductions and cuts in social spending in the name of competitiveness, on behalf of investors and capitalists.

This right-wing stance increasingly met with opposition from readers and subscribers. Some years ago, an avalanche of protest letters and subscription cancellations descended on the paper in response to a regular column in the *FR* by Götz Aly. Aly repeatedly claimed that the Nazi regime was a dictatorship providing privileges and benefits for the German people. Based on this absurd thesis, he launched a campaign against the welfare state and egalitarian principles.

Frankfurter Rundschau 2003, making the loss

required state backing, which was accorded by the then-prime minister of Hesse, Roland Koch (CDU). The SPD media group, DDVG, bought up 90 percent of *FR* shares one year later. In 2006 the Cologne DuMont Schauberg media group acquired a majority stake.

The advent of the Cologne Media Group was accompanied by a change of editor in chief. Wolfgang Storz, an IG Metall executive board member who had directed the union's newspaper *metal* before his time with the *FR*, was replaced by Uwe Vorkötter. The new owners—the DuMont Group owns several papers and 25 percent of Israel's Ha'aretz Group—now determined the paper's political line. The *FR* came to give regular backing to US and Israeli war policies.

The management filed for bankruptcy at the beginning of the recent Israeli bombing of Gaza. In the night from November 16 to 17, the Israeli military launched hundreds of bomb attacks on densely-populated Palestinian areas, while Israeli gunboats opened fire on Gaza. The next morning, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* appeared with the headline: " Hamas shells cities". The *FR* also justified Israeli army drone killings, citing international jurist Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg with the words: "Killing the Hamas leader was a legitimate act".

In the spring, the *FR* also participated in the smear campaign against Günter Grass, who drafted a poem warning of Israel's military build-up against Iran. The newspaper berated the 85-year-old winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature as "a source of anti-Semitic sentiment", denouncing his poem as "totally misleading". For weeks the *FR* opened its pages to Grass's critics.

It is no surprise that the *FR* supported last year's NATO war against Libya and now condones the proxy war against Syria, knowing that they were preparation for a larger war against Iran that could engulf the whole Middle East. This provoked opposition from many readers of the paper, which lost many more subscribers than other newspapers.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau's* demise marks a political watershed. The shallow propaganda of social partnership has been undermined by social reality. Faced with the social-economic crisis and deepening class tensions, the editorial board has become a mouthpiece for political reaction.

The era of class harmony is over. It is time to take an unflinching look at the class nature of society and bold international socialist policies.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact