

Germany: 87-year-old imprisoned for fare-dodging

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Tucked away as a minor news item, the German media reported in December, that an 87-year-old destitute pensioner had been arrested and sent to prison by a Wuppertal court for persistent fare-dodging on public transport.

The elderly lady from Ennepetal near Wuppertal was caught without a ticket 22 times between February and September 2012. In June 2013 the Wuppertal court ruled that she should pay a fine of €474 (US\$649). The pensioner was in no position to pay this sum and, after failing to make the agreed payment installments, she was sentenced to prison for 40 days.

The court verdict swiftly aroused public reaction, prompting the *Bild* newspaper to feature the story and intervene to provide bail, enabling the woman to leave the women's prison in Gelsenkirchen after a few days. *Bild* thus hoped to defuse the scandal.

With regard to her fare-dodging, the woman said, "I had no other choice. Although I am still able to get around on foot, I simply can't walk long distances anymore." She has to get by on a pension of €560 a month, out of which she must pay €470 for rent. To supplement her pension, she works as a daily cleaner for €3 an hour. She was clearly using public transport in order to get to her workplace, but could not afford to pay the fares.

She had been required to go to another Wuppertal court hearing this September, but failed to attend. As a result, the court put out an order for her arrest, which the police eventually carried out in December.

Media presentation of the incident is typified by the *Westdeutsche Zeitung* newspaper report bewailing that "the court should imprison such a frail and elderly lady just before Christmas."

Such reportage is deliberately intended to draw attention away from the socio-economic background to

the case. The same paper wrote that "the incident has provoked a wave of outrage". In order to divert this wave of outrage, directed against rapidly spreading poverty, the yellow press and popular dailies are painting the picture of a wayward, headstrong old woman, whose vulnerability should be pitied.

The reality is that her individual circumstances typify that of millions of others who have been plunged into poverty and are struggling desperately to find a way to survive. These include hundreds of thousands of pensioners who cannot make ends meet with their minuscule pensions. For years pensions have been reduced while rents have soared, driving many elderly into dire financial straits with no way out.

Widespread poverty has become a fact of daily life. It is the result of government policies over the last decade which have drastically reduced the living standards of broad swathes of the population.

According to "Poverty Report 2013", published by the Association for Equal Welfare, the number of those living in poverty in Germany has risen from 14 percent in 2006 to 15.2 percent today. Any positive trends from previous years have been halted or put into reverse due to the policies of successive German governments. "Germany has never been as divided as it is today", said Ulrich Schneider, the association's director, and this division is accelerating further as austerity policies continue and intensify.



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