

German social democrats pursue law-and-order policies in Hamburg

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For the past week, police in the German city of Hamburg declared entire areas of the city to be so called “danger zones,” where basic democratic rights were curtailed. The measure, justified on the pretext of violence against police officers, was only lifted on Monday.

In spite of mass opposition, governing mayor Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) defended the action in an interview with the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In the “danger zones,” police can check and search pedestrians arbitrarily and without any suspicion that an offence has been committed. They can order pedestrians to leave the area and issue bans on their presence throughout the entire zone. Such bans are normally restricted to a few streets and are rarely issued.

Numerous demonstrations were broken up, over a hundred banning orders issued, and a hundred people apprehended and searched for wearing black clothes or appearing to be part of the “left” milieu. The approximately 50,000 people living in the affected areas were placed under general suspicion and had to assume that they would be searched.

Scholz has now explicitly defended these actions, which are unprecedented in post-war Germany. The zones were “implemented flexibly, calmly and with little conflict,” Scholz told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He brushed aside constitutional issues of democratic rights, stating: “The instrument proved successful and will continue to be successful.”

Speaking to the daily *Tageszeitung*, Hamburg’s Interior Minister Michael Neumann refused to discuss the appropriateness of the police action or its constitutional basis. He declared bluntly, “It is absolutely the job of the interior senator and the police

to take care of security and order.”

Such arguments are made by representatives of police states. They are even more remarkable in that it has become clear over recent days that it was predominantly the police who flouted the law.

Two events provided the police’s main justification for the establishment of the no-go areas. These were clashes at a demonstration on December 21 against the closure of the *Rote Flora* alternative culture centre and an apparent attack on the Davidwache, the building of the Hamburg police commissioner, seven days later. Officials claimed that it was attacked at night by 40 people from anarchist groups, seriously injuring a policeman.

It later emerged that the policeman was injured far from the Davidwache. Doubts also arose about the perpetrators. Not only eye-witnesses, but also the domestic intelligence service reported that the perpetrators had included not members of “left” groups, but hooligans.

The clashes on December 21 resulted from provocations by the police. The 10,000 protesters, who were peaceful at first, were blocked after a few metres by a large contingent of police. Officers plunged repeatedly into the midst of the demonstration in order to create a provocation. When a few bottles and fireworks were thrown, the police employed water cannon, batons and tear gas, and the situation escalated.

Scholz’ arguments about the demonstration in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* would justify the suppression of all social and political protest. Scholz claimed that, since the city senate had ruled that the continued existence of the Rota Flora centre posed no security threat, the protest had shown “that at the demonstration in December the issue was not really about politics,” but rather “to practice violence.”

By implication, the right of freedom of assembly only need be respected if the senate considers the demonstrators' concerns to be legitimate.

But in reality, in Scholz' opinion, this is not the case. "Hamburg is a social city," he told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In addition, the city has "the most modern policy towards immigrants and refugees in the whole of Germany."

Poverty has in fact grown in Hamburg in recent years. The driving of socially disadvantaged layers out of rented properties in the central districts of the city has developed into an explosive social issue.

The Hamburg senate's "modern refugee policy" is essentially the denial of the basic necessities of life to migrants and the continual worsening of their living conditions in order to force them to leave the city. In October last year, the police organised an unprecedented campaign targeting black migrants, in order to detect African immigrants who had come to Hamburg from the Italian island of Lampedusa and deport them.

Widespread opposition developed to the policies of the senate. There were repeated demonstrations against police violence, in defence of the refugees and against the gentrification of the city.

The escalation of violence by the police and the systematic attack on fundamental democratic rights serves to suppress these protests. However, the offensive by Scholz and Neumann and their anti-democratic argumentation show that much more is at stake.

At a federal level, the recently formed grand coalition of the SPD with the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union is planning major social attacks and the militarisation of foreign policy. This will inevitably lead to opposition and cannot be implemented by democratic means.

Scholz is one of the main architects of the grand coalition, having led the finance group during the coalition talks, where he drafted future social attacks. In Hamburg, he has now provided a precedent for massive restrictions on democratic rights and supplied anti-democratic arguments to justify this.

It is no accident that this is attempted by the only state in Germany which has a single-party SPD government. In other states, SPD interior ministers—Ralf Jäger in North Rhine-Westphalia, Boris

Pistorius in Schleswig-Holstein, or Reinhold Gall in Baden-Württemberg—have also sought to present themselves as "law-and-order" politicians. Gall is a vehement advocate of the storing of personal data by the authorities.

Eight years after the departure of the last SPD federal interior minister, Otto Schily—who was responsible for Germany's anti-terror laws—the SPD is determined to "take back the field of domestic security," *Der Spiegel* commented.

The SPD has a long history on this issue. The party, the only one to fight for democratic rights in the nineteenth century under the Kaiser, was transformed into a "law-and-order" party with its vote in support of war credits one hundred years ago, at the beginning of World War I.

Its leading members included the butcher Gustav Noske, who played a key role in suppressing the revolutionary uprising of the workers in 1918-19. In post-war West Germany, the SPD supported every law restricting democratic rights: it backed the emergency laws in 1969; the radicals' decree in 1972 banning members of groups deemed "radical" from state employment; and Schily's anti-terror laws.

The politics of the SPD in Hamburg makes it unmistakably clear that it will draw on this tradition in the grand coalition.



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