

German government adopts tighter laws on economic immigration

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Almost two weeks ago, the German government passed restrictions for migrants from other European Union (EU) states, which will result in a drastic reduction in the so-called freedom of movement of workers within the EU. Above all, workers from the poorest countries in the EU—Bulgaria and Romania—will be affected, as the government will eliminate their social rights and welfare entitlements, resulting in ruthless exploitation, wage dumping and exorbitant rent prices.

The basis for the decision was a report from the state secretariat committee entitled “Legal issues and challenges resulting from the utilisation of the social security system by EU residents.” This commission was set up after the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), partners in the governing coalition, campaigned in the European elections earlier this year against economic migrants, who were all accused of grabbing social welfare benefits. The CSU chairman demanded in January, “Whoever is committing fraud must go!”

Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière hailed the report as “an important contribution in informing the discussion,” adding, “The correct steps had been taken with the relevant legislation against abuse of freedom of movement and to relieve local authorities.” The latter comment referred to a plan to transfer an additional €25 million to municipalities this year that have higher percentages of Romanian and Bulgarian social welfare claimants. Labour and Social Minister Andrea Nahles (Social Democrat Party, SPD), who presented the report along with de Maizière, was also satisfied with it. The report was also welcomed by the government’s immigration adviser, Iydan Özo?uz (SPD), with the comment that it had “informed an intense debate.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Although

there are numerous statistics on immigration to Germany in the 140-page report, there is no evidence that the claimed abuse takes place on a mass or even limited scale. Despite this, a wide range of legal restrictions were suggested, which the cabinet pushed through at its first meeting after the summer break.

After six months, migrants from other EU states who haven’t found work will lose their guaranteed right to reside. Anyone who provides false information in the course of obtaining authorisation to reside, even if due to language barriers, will be severely punished. The abuse of social welfare can result in the imposition of a five-year travel ban to the country. The regulatory authorities, such as the family office in the case of child benefit or the job centre will be compelled to undertake more extensive reviews and verification of data. Mistrust of foreign applicants will become institutionalised. Many workers, particularly those from southeast Europe, are already confronted with bureaucratic trickery when dealing with the authorities.

The German government has up to now refused to publish any evidence that welfare benefits have been improperly awarded to migrants from southeast Europe. Not only did the secretariat report evade presenting hard evidence, direct questions to the federal and the Bavarian state governments were not answered.

In response to a question from the Greens in parliament in May, it was stated that there had merely been a few dozen suspected cases, and there were no figures for actual convictions. In response to a question from the Left Party, de Maizière stated that no independent “quantitative information” was available. But in the same breath, the ministry referred to a large number of “suspected fake marriages,” without citing figures or indicating which state requirements were not met by migrants suspected of “fake marriages.”

The report also accepted the alleged problems caused by Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in a number of municipalities, such as Mannheim, Duisburg, Munich and Frankfurt. In 2013, between 1,600 and 4,300 moved to each location. The message was that the impoverishment of communities and other social problems could be linked to this.

In reality, the cuts at the federal, state and municipal level are responsible for this. In order to reduce their debts, these cities and municipalities have sold off valuable assets and privatised public housing. In many cases, these properties have been allowed to fall into disrepair, and housing speculators are seeking huge profits from migrants, who have nowhere else to live and are offered no support from the authorities.

A glance at the statistics is very helpful in accounting for the extent of the impoverishment and exploitation of migrant workers from southeast Europe in Germany. Of the 474,238 foreigners registered as unemployed in Germany in July 2012, there are only 1.2 percent—5,648—Romanian citizens. Measured against total unemployment of 2.8 million, this equates to a ratio of 0.2 percent.

In addition, only one-in-10 Romanians and Bulgarians in Germany receive Hartz IV social welfare. This is generally for people who have to top up their wages in order to live. Hourly wages of less than €5 for labourers in agriculture, in the meat industry or the construction sector are not the exception, but the bitter rule. Southeast European workers are also pressured by employers to work unpaid overtime hours.

Already today, many of these workers are cut off from social welfare even though they have a right to claim. The daily *Tageszeitung* reported that it is normal practice in job centres not to give out application forms to workers who cannot speak German. When applications are submitted, decisions are sometimes dragged out over months, forcing many exasperated families to return to their lives of miserable poverty in Romania and Bulgaria. Migrants from EU states receive only child benefit and wage top-ups in the first three months of their residence, and no other social welfare. For those seeking work, this period can be extended.

The new restrictions are essentially a part of a selection process deciding which immigrants are welcome, and which are not. The first category includes

nurses and doctors, who have emigrated in the tens of thousands from Romania in recent years. The medics are highly trained in Romania, but can barely feed their families in Germany with their training. As a percentage of gross domestic product, Romania spends the least of any EU country on health care—5.9 percent compared with an EU average of 8.8 percent. As a result, 10,000 doctors have emigrated, 3,500 to Germany. By contrast, the unreliable health care system in Romania has been decimated.

It is the broad mass of the impoverished population across Europe that the German government is targeting for restriction of freedom of movement and right of residence. In Romania, for example, the legal minimum wage is just €1.06 per hour and youth unemployment is 25 percent. Things are much worse for the Roma, who face discrimination on many levels.

The fractions of the opposition Green and Left parties criticised the draft law as a violation of the right of freedom of movement in the EU. EU Green parliamentary deputy Rebecca Harms complained that the government was creating “invisible borders within the European Union.”

Nonetheless, according to a report on Deutschland Radio on 27 August, the EU commission has already responded positively to the proposal to intensify controls on migrants from Romania and Bulgaria. The reliance on EU regulations only proves the hypocrisy of the Greens and Left Party. It is ultimately the brutal austerity policies dictated by the EU that force many workers to emigrate from new EU states. But the Greens and Left Party are firm defenders of the EU.



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