

Leader of German Social Democrats sides with right-wing Pegida movement

Ulrich Rippert
9 February 2015

In an interview with the German magazine *Stern*, Social Democrat (SPD) leader Sigmar Gabriel responded to the question of whether the anti-Islamic Pegida movement should be regarded as an integral part of German society with the reply “most certainly. Regardless of whether one likes it or not, there is a democratic right to be right-wing or German nationalist.”

Gabriel’s comments are a deliberate attempt to legitimise fascist ideas. Only 82 years have passed since right-wing and German nationalist politicians played a key role in the transfer of power to Hitler. The right-wing Centre politician Franz von Papen and the German nationalist Alfred Hugenberg led key ministries in Hitler’s first cabinet.

The Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the west, which is Pegida’s full name, exhibit clear fascist tendencies. As the Nazis once used anti-Semitism, so Pegida uses anti-Islamism to direct the anger of embittered layers of the middle class and declassed elements into racist and right-wing channels. Pegida’s founder Lutz Bachmann, who has a criminal record, was recently forced to resign after he referred to refugees as “cattle,” “trash” and “dirt,” and published a picture online of himself in a Hitler pose.

Fearful parents of immigrant children in Dresden have reported that they no longer allow their offspring out of the house on Mondays—the day of the regular Pegida demonstrations.

When Gabriel speaks of “democratic rights,” he is not talking about protection against state repression and persecution. Pegida is not being suppressed. On the contrary, the movement has enjoyed an incredible level of media publicity. German newspapers have dedicated pages to reports on the movement’s activities, Pegida spokeswoman Katrin Oertel was invited to a primetime

talk show, and leading politicians, from the right-wing Christian Social Union to the Left Party, emphasise the need to “take their concerns seriously” and “listen” to them.

Pegida has marched every Monday without interference under police guard through the city of Dresden. The only ones who opposed the movement were peaceful demonstrators who protested against their racist slogans and anti-Islamic propaganda. If Gabriel goes out of his way to come to Pegida’s defense under these conditions, it means he is emphatically taking the side of the brown mob against those advocating peaceful coexistence of people of different origins and different cultures.

Gabriel had already met with Pegida supporters, two weeks ago in Dresden, in order, as he put it, to discuss their justifiable fears and concerns. Now he is going a step further and sanctioning the dissemination of their fascistic ideas as a “democratic right.”

Nowhere in the German constitution is such a right provided for. It protects the rights of freedom of opinion and assembly in general, but not specifically the rights of right-wingers and German nationalists. It is significant that such a formulation comes from the chairman of the party that introduced career bans for left-wing critics of capitalism in the 1970s.

It is necessary to see Gabriel’s partisanship for Pegida in the context of the rapidly intensifying international crisis of capitalism and the growing danger of war. “Fascism rediscovered the dregs of society for politics,” wrote Leon Trotsky in 1933. Gabriel’s calculations are very similar. He is supporting Pegida in order to mobilise the most backward social elements against workers and those who mount opposition to social attacks and war.

In other countries, leading Social Democrats are also

collaborating with right-wing extremists and fascists. In France, President François Hollande of the Socialist Party used the terrorist attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to invite the leader of the far right National Front, Marine le Pen, to the Elysee palace, and to unveil a propaganda campaign against Muslims.

Since it voted for war credits in 1914 in the First World War, the SPD has been one of the key props for capitalist rule in Germany. In 1918-19, the party suppressed the revolutionary uprising of the workers. In the early 1930s, it sabotaged the resistance to Hitler and defended the Weimar state apparatus, which helped the Nazis to power. But even then there were many workers in the SPD's ranks, and the Nazis were compelled to dissolve the SPD after suppressing the Communist Party.

Today, the SPD is itself assuming the responsibility of encouraging right-wing extremist forces. The SPD has fully detached itself from its roots in the workers movement, and abandoned the program of social reform that it defended in the post-war period, winning the support of many workers.

With the Hartz laws of 15 years ago, the SPD-Green coalition government began the fiercest attacks in Germany in the post-war period. Interior minister Otto Schily restricted democratic rights and strengthened the police and intelligence agencies. For the past year, the SPD's Frank-Walter Steinmeier has been directing the revival of German militarism. As in the 1930s, these policies go hand in hand with the building up of the extreme right and fascist movements.

As Gabriel's support for Pegida makes clear, the SPD is now playing a central role. It is no accident that in spite of his racist propaganda campaign against Muslims, Thilo Sarrazin remains in the SPD. It was no coincidence that a meeting led by Sarrazin in Dresden was a key event in the emergence of Pegida, which has put into practice his anti-Muslim program.

Since the reunification of Germany, the social composition of the SPD has also changed significantly. Four hundred thousand from a total of 900,000 have left the party, above all workers and lower-level employees. The SPD is a party of state officials, trade union bureaucrats and other careerists, who climb the social ladder with the help of their SPD party card and have only contempt for the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact