

German “democrat” Heribert Prantl lauds vote on austerity for Greece

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Heribert Prantl, who has headed the department of internal policy at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for twenty years, is one of the few German journalists who has preserved a sense of democratic rights. He has received more than twenty awards and accolades for his editorials, commentaries and books on this subject.

But Prantl is a typical German democrat. His commitment to democracy usually ends where it should actually begin: with the authority of the state.

The German bourgeoisie, which in its history never completed a victorious democratic revolution, has developed a most remarkable conception of democracy. For it, democracy does not mean the protection of citizens from the encroachments of the state, but that the state itself embodies democracy. In hardly any other country would one think to personalize the state as “father” and to call the domestic intelligence service, which spies on its own citizens and constantly breaks the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, the “Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.”

In Germany, democracy at best means being accountable to certain formal criteria, but not that these forms are filled with content and that power actually belongs to the people. This is also Prantl’s attitude. He delivered a glaring example of this on Wednesday in the online edition of the *Süddeutsche*.

Under the heading, “Union mixed up—democracy refreshed” (Union=Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), he praises the Bundestag (federal parliament) session on the recent austerity package for Greece as a “good day” for parliamentary democracy. Prantl welcomed the “No” vote by 63 Union deputies, who refused to follow their own government, as a victory of “freedom of conscience,” which is “medicine against governmental

excesses.”

Although he believes that party discipline is justified: “Both principles are important—the freedom of deputies and the organizing power of the parties and parliamentary factions. If both principles are observed and respected, parliamentary democracy is well.”

The editorial ends with the words, “Well done for those voting in favour of the Greece package. An even greater well done for those who voted against it. They must endure being challenged by name. A good deputy can endure this.”

Such words send a shiver over one’s back. Did not the Bundestag decide nothing less than the virtual abolition of democracy in Greece on Wednesday?

The “Memorandum of Understanding,” which was part of the draft resolution submitted to parliament by the government, turns this Aegean country into a protectorate of the “Institutions” (European Commission, European Central Bank, European Stability Mechanism), where Germany sets the tone. The Greek government is not even permitted to submit draft legislation to parliament without their permission.

Over 360 pages, the Memorandum prescribes for the Greek government which social spending it must reduce, which government officials it should dismiss, which public institutions are to be privatized and what social and democratic rights must be abolished. For the impoverished Greek population, it means even more poverty, hunger and in many cases death.

The Memorandum also blatantly violates the democratic will of the Greek people, who spoke out by a large majority on July 5 against further austerity measures. The attitude of the German Bundestag does not make it any better that the Greek government is now stabbing the Greek people in the back, a government which had promised an end to the austerity

and has now become its executive organ.

Prantl does not contest any of this. For him, democracy rules when some deputies in the Bundestag follow their “conscience,” while others follow party discipline. He is indifferent to the fact that the new austerity package for Greece represents a milestone on the road to the abolition of democratic and social rights across Europe.

One could have called March 24, 1933 a “good day for parliamentary democracy” for the same reason. At that time, the Reichstag (parliament) passed Hitler’s Enabling Act. The bourgeois deputies voted in favour, the social democratic deputies against. Ignoring the fact that the Communist deputies were already sitting in concentration camps, the formal rules of democracy were therefore upheld. Nevertheless, March 24 legalized Hitler’s unrestricted dictatorship.

Without exception, the Union dissenters acclaimed by Prantl attack the government from the right. They are not defending democracy in Greece, but are demanding even harsher austerity. That Prantl nevertheless awards them an “even greater well done” highlights the reactionary consequences of his attitude.

This is not an individual question. The crisis of European capitalism and the consequent social polarization between rich and poor have reached a level which can no longer be reconciled with democratic forms of rule. Formal democracy has degenerated into mere drapery which hides the naked dictatorship of finance capital.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle for a socialist society that does not serve the enrichment of a tiny minority, but which uses all existing means and ways to solve today’s major social problems.



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