

The conflict over refugee policy in Germany

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The influx of several hundred thousand refugees has politically polarized Germany. In recent weeks, leading political and media figures have made vituperative denunciations of migrants and called for an ever-greater crackdown on people seeking asylum in the country.

Christian Social Union (CSU) chairman Horst Seehofer has threatened extralegal “emergency measures” and solidarized himself with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has responded to the influx of refugees with barbed wire, tear gas and the military. German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière went on the evening newscasts of ZDF to rail against refugees, calling them ungrateful, arrogant and claiming that they “astoundingly had the money to travel hundreds of kilometers by taxi through Germany.”

Humboldt University professor Jörg Baberowski warns of the destruction of society’s foundations by foreign cultures, while *Spiegel Online* columnist Jan Fleischhauer warns of the “conquest of the nation through uncontrolled immigration.” The list goes on.

The smear campaign against refugees stands in sharp contrast to the sentiments of Germany’s population, the majority of which feels solidarity for migrants fleeing violence in the Middle East. It is grist for the mill of the far right, who are also courted by the media. Every gathering of halfwits bearing xenophobic signs in front of refugee homes receives considerable attention, while the countless volunteers who serve and provide for refugees at great personal expense are largely ignored.

The refugee question has caused serious tensions within the government. In addition to the CSU, leading politicians in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) have attacked Chancellor Angela Merkel. More than a hundred party functionaries have signed an urgent letter criticizing Merkel’s “policy of open borders” and calls for the rejection of all refugees from “secure third countries” at the border.

Merkel currently rejects a freeze on admissions as unrealistic and is therefore presented as a “Chancellor with heart” by the liberal media. The conflict has become so pointed that some commentators have said that Merkel’s chancellorship could be at risk.

In reality, the differences within the political establishment are of a tactical nature. That also holds true for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which alternates between criticizing Merkel for being too hard or too soft. In practice, the entire government is working frantically to stop the flow of refugees into the country.

On Sunday, Merkel traveled personally to Turkey in order to convince President Erdogan to seal off the country’s border with Europe. In doing so, she provided the authoritarian president, who is confronted with growing opposition, with a much-needed show of support just two weeks prior to Turkey’s parliamentary elections.

German military vessels this month initiated an operation to stop and destroy refugee boats in the Mediterranean as part of “Operation Sophia.” In Italy, Greece and Bulgaria, vast internment camps are being built under pressure from Germany where refugees who survive the sea will be imprisoned. The government, at least if the conservative parties get their way, also wants to build such concentration camps on the German border. Meanwhile the German parliament this month adopted the most severe tightening of asylum laws in 23 years.

The supposedly “welcoming culture” of Germany has been completely exposed. The authorities are doing everything in their power to make the situation as intolerable as possible for refugees. They harass them with a bureaucratic ruthlessness that would have claimed many lives had it not been for the selfless assistance of volunteer aid workers.

According to a report in *Die Welt*, while it is damp

and nightly temperatures in many places drop below freezing, there are still 42,000 refugees being housed in unheated tents at preliminary reception centers, including many families with small children.

Especially scandalous is the situation in Berlin, where refugees often have to stand in line for weeks just to be registered. Prior to registration, they have neither the right to shelter nor to social aid or health care. According to an open letter sent to the mayor by refugee organizations, there have only been 200 people registered each business day, even though 16,000 refugees arrived in Berlin in September alone.

The conflict over Germany's "welcoming culture," is not about the fate of refugees. On that question, all the parties are united. It is about winning the time to strengthen ultra-right forces. Merkel rightly fears that opposition to the policies of her government will grow if she is too openly identified with xenophobic slogans. That is why she lets herself be photographed with refugees and poses as a kind of Mother Teresa while she works hard to seal the external borders of the European Union and tighten asylum laws.

Foreign policy motivations also play a role. The majority of the government fears that the European Union will break apart if it closes its borders and sends refugees to neighboring countries. They hope that adopting a relatively refugee-friendly posture will help to strengthen German influence in the Middle East and military interventions in the region.

The systematic efforts of leading politicians and media figures to mobilize the right-wing dregs of society and stir up an atmosphere of intolerance is a warning. These efforts are aimed not only at refugees, but against any social and political opposition.

For two years, the ruling elite has endeavored to revive German militarism and has met with overwhelming rejection. Resistance to low wages, social cuts and layoffs is growing, as the strikes in day care centers, the post office and other sectors have shown.

In the First World War, the ruling class could rely on the war fever of the middle class and the betrayal of Social Democracy in order to send millions of young men senselessly to their deaths. In the Second World War, they required the Nazi dictatorship, which crushed the labor movement and brutally persecuted all opposition. Today, they are working again to build a

right-wing movement to intimidate and suppress resistance to their policies.

Under these conditions, the defense of refugees, opposition to war and the struggle against capitalism are inextricably linked.



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