

Germany: SPD leader calls for cuts to child benefits for European citizens

Dietmar Henning
22 December 2016

As poverty levels grow in Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is fostering xenophobia. On Saturday, Economics Minister and SPD chairman, Sigmar Gabriel, called for the curtailing of child allowances for European residents in Germany if their children were not currently living in the country. In this case, “child allowance should be paid at the level paid in [the children’s] home country,” Gabriel told newspapers published by the Funke Media Group.

In order to justify his demand, Gabriel turned reality on its head. He said: “In some large cities, there are whole streets with run-down estates where immigrants live for just one reason: because they can receive child allowance at a German level for their children who do not live in Germany.”

Immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania, in the majority Sinti and Roma, are severely exploited and suffer from mass poverty. Often denied miserly Hartz IV social benefits, they must accept any sort of work, no matter how low the pay. Many have to keep themselves and their families above water by working as day labourers.

They can only find accommodation in “run-down estates,” paid for from their miserable wages (in many cases less than €5 an hour) and child allowance—their only secure source of income. To now claim they tolerate these conditions merely because of child benefit payments is the type of racist demagoguery associated with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and other far-right outfits.

The yellow press *Bild-Zeitung* subsequently delivered the figures. According to the Federal Agency for Labour, Germany paid child allowance for some 185,000 children living in EU countries who did not have German citizenship. In December of last year, this figure stood at 120,000. From January to December

2016, around €32 billion in child allowance was paid, of which €470 million was paid to children living in EU countries without German citizenship. Poles, Romanians, Croatians and Czechs were most likely to receive child allowance from Germany.

“There is a right to immigration in Europe, but there is no right to immigrate to social systems without work,” Gabriel said. This is a lie. In fact, Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union guarantees the “free movement of workers” in Europe.

EU citizens are thereby entitled to “work in another EU country” and “live there for that purpose,” the European Commission notes on its web site. EU nationals are to be treated “in the same way as the nationals of the host country” with regard to access to employment, working conditions and all other social benefits and tax benefits.

German municipalities welcomed Gabriel’s statement. “We need this law now,” Helmut Dedy, the chief executive of the Organisation of German Cities, told *Die Welt*. Gerd Landsberg, Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the chief executive of the German Association of Cities and Towns, agreed, saying, “Free movement within the EU does not mean that EU citizens can choose the social system with the most comprehensive services.” A new law was needed to prevent a “certain form of social tourism.”

There are enormous differences in child allowance in Europe, “in some cases in excess of €100 per month,” Landsberg said. If the child allowance for 185,000 children could be reduced by a monthly €100, savings of €18.5 million would be made. This sum amounts to less than 0.07 percent of the total of paid-out child allowance and makes clear that Gabriel’s demand is solely aimed at fostering right-wing sentiments.

Gabriel even criticised German Finance Minister

Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) from the right, stating, “I have been waiting months for a proposal for such a reduction in child allowances from the responsible CDU finance minister.”

Schäuble is not against a reduction in child allowance. At present, he cannot enforce it due to the European legal system. “Last week the EU Commission presented an initiative that does not allow child allowance in the European Union to be adjusted to the price level in the child’s country of residence,” a spokesman from Schäuble’s department declared. This was a matter of regret and “possibilities were being explored to change European citizenship law.”

The Commission’s proposal states: “There is no provision for the child’s benefits to be linked to an index: the country of employment of the parent continues to be responsible for the payment of child allowance and this amount can not be adjusted, if the child lives elsewhere.”

According to the Commission, less than 1 percent of children’s benefits are paid from one member state to another within the EU.

Gabriel’s proposal has been heartily greeted by the conservative CDU and Christian Social Union (CSU) parties. The CSU regional group leader in the Bundestag, Gerda Hasselfeldt, noted that her party had long advocated such a reduction. If Gabriel were now to embrace this course, that is “good and necessary,” she said.

CDU Vice-President Thomas Strobl, a right-wing rabble-rouser who puts forward the policies of the AfD in the CDU on many questions, said it was laudable that Gabriel was now on this track. His colleague, deputy CDU chairperson Julia Klöckner, remarked that Gabriel was making suggestions which, in the mouths of others, he claimed were populist. CSU General Secretary Andreas Scheuer stated that evidently the SPD boss had ended the year with good resolutions, and, “In the new year we can solve the issue together.”

Last April, Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD) had already presented a draft bill that would deny unemployed EU citizens social benefits for five years. Now the SPD is taking the next step to direct anger over its own self-created social misery into racist and chauvinistic channels.

Fifteen years ago, the SPD-Green coalition led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) created the prerequisites for a

huge low-wage sector with its Agenda 2010 program. Currently every fifth employee in Germany works at wages below €10 per hour. The resulting social gulf plays into the hands of the AfD, which exploits social anger against foreigners, Muslims and other minorities.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)