

Burqa ban included in German union contract

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20 April 2017

Five unions in the German state of Hesse have accepted the introduction of a so-called burqa ban into a public sector contract. In doing so, they have opened the door for the Hesse state government, a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Green Party, to prohibit the veil, even though a corresponding law does not exist.

On April 4, the Verdi (German United Services Trade Union) Contract Commission approved a new labour agreement covering 45,000 Hesse state employees. It contains a passage which requires workers “not to conceal their face as a matter of principle in the exercise of their duties or in the case of direct employment.” In addition to Verdi, the teachers' union GEW and three other trade unions also accepted the contract.

The contract, which includes a moderate wage increase of 4.2 percent for two years and a job ticket for local transport, will apply to 90,000 Hesse public sector workers. The state of Hesse had already left the joint collective agreement of the Länder (German federal states, TV-L) in 2004.

State interior minister Peter Beuth (CDU) is said to have made the paragraph concerning the full veil the ultimate condition for agreeing the contract. Beuth, like his chief and predecessor, Hesse state premier Volker Bouffier, is a hardliner in the CDU for whom the increase in the powers of the state under federal interior minister Thomas de Maizière has not gone far enough.

The prohibition of the full veil is a demand with which the CDU wants to recover votes from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). While it affects only a very small number of women, it is being used to foment anti-Muslim sentiments. It is part of the “Berlin Declaration of the Interior Ministers of the CDU and CSU (Christian Social Union)” of August 2016. The demands include: an increase in the number of police at the federal and state level, the use of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) for domestic operations, the video monitoring of public places, a European-wide networking of databases and the abolition of dual citizenship.

In Hesse, interior minister Beuth and state premier

Bouffier are champions of this right-wing campaign. In August 2016, for example, Bouffier declared of the full veil: “Anyone who excludes herself from society by clothing cannot be integrated in a rational way.” A “Burqa-wearing woman” was inconceivable, in his opinion, in public service.

Since then, the Bavarian CSU state government has already passed a Burqa ban in parts of the public sphere. In the public sector in Bavaria, for example, the face can no longer be covered in kindergartens, schools and universities, in courts, when driving, in polling stations and during ID checks.

However, it is not certain whether the law will survive scrutiny by the Supreme Court. The right to the “undisturbed exercise of religion” is anchored in the constitution. In the 2015 so-called headscarf decision, the Supreme Court had ruled that “the state is not allowed to evaluate such beliefs of its citizens or even to call them true or false.” This could be why interior minister Beuth would prefer to deal with the issue through collective bargaining with the trade unions.

The conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote, “He [Beuth] probably does not want to burden the coalition with the Greens with a topic that could see both parties driven apart by the opposition.”

Beuth, however, can fear little resistance from the Greens. The Green Party state parliamentary deputy Jürgen Frömmrich has not the slightest problem with the Burqa ban in the contract agreed with the unions. He praised it exuberantly, “It is a good deal and a good day for Hesse.”

The contract has breached a taboo. The *hessschau* cited the Frankfurt employment lawyer Peter Wedde saying that the contract was “fatal” and contained a “blueprint for additional demands by the employers.” Wedde reveals the profoundly opportunist character of the deal: It works according to the motto, “We give you a little more money, for that we want something else, which we do not want to regulate politically, because it is too delicate and too risky.”

The trade unions—which in addition to Verdi and the GEW, include the police union GdP, the civil servants' union dbb and the DStG (German tax union)—have helped the CDU

state interior minister with the problem by including his demand for a ban on the full veil.

On the eve of concluding the collective agreement on March 3 in Dietzenbach, Jochen Nagel, GEW chairman and a member of the Left Party, said, “This issue is complete nonsense in this context. One can be quite certain: the trade unions will not allow themselves to be involved in such a dirty business.”

Nevertheless, Nagel signed the shameful contract on behalf of the GEW. The GEW text on the agreement states it is “completely clear” that “the proposal is part of a political campaign to mobilize resentment against Islam for electoral reasons.” With this, “the employer has put the union contract negotiation committees in a morally difficult situation.”

But why did they agree, when it was “completely clear” that it was a foul right-wing campaign? The answer reads: “The GEW negotiating committee has agreed to the results of the negotiation mainly on the basis of the material offer.” So, “the material offer”—i.e. a few euros and a job ticket—was enough for the trade unions to do the dirty work of the Hesse CDU.

Shortly before the conclusion of the contract, Verdi state leader Jürgen Bothner made clear the profound opportunism of the unions: “The question is: the state of Hesse would like to have this—what do we get for it? ... well, if they want to have it in the collective agreement: collective agreements are compromises. Then there is a price for this. Then let's see.”

In fact, the behaviour of the trade unions goes far beyond pure opportunism. It is part of a breathtaking shift to the right by the so-called “lefts,” trade unions and the media, which Left Party leader Sahra Wagenknecht summed up with her infamous statement: “Whoever abuses their right to hospitality has forfeited their hospitality.”

There are countless examples for this turn to the right. It began in France with an aggressive anti- headscarf campaign , which was also supported by “left” parties such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO), and recently appeared in the *Spiegel* column of Jakob Augstein, who claims that “Islamization” threatens the “identity” of the Germans.

In *Der Spiegel*, the comments by Jan Fleischhauer show how closely the anti-Muslim campaign is connected with the foulest war-mongering. In a commentary over two years ago, (“Chantalle, put the burqa on”), Fleischhauer had claimed, “The impression of many citizens that Muslim parents do less for the education of their children is not evil prejudice, but corresponds to the facts.”

It was no accident that the *Spiegel* columnist wrote in the same commentary that Islamic State (IS) could only be combated with massive military force: “The only way I see

to deal with the spectre is drones and a few American elite units, who would show the Salafists the entrance to the martyr's heaven.”

The prohibition on the veil also found support in the newspaper *Junge Welt*. It writes, “Much speaks in favour of banning the wearing of the Burqa, a symbol of Islamic ideology and the religiously veiled reign of moral terror, as well as other forms of full veiling in all areas of the public service.”

In reality, the inclusion of the ban on the full veil in the collective bargaining agreement means an open affront against thousands of workers in the public service. The prohibition of the full veil, the Hijab or Niqab, stigmatizes a very small, religious minority, fostering resentment against Muslim immigrants, thus deepening the division of the working class.

In urban transport, in hospitals, in garbage collection or at the Rhine-Main airport, many workers have a Muslim family background. Many of them have long since fallen out of the public service collective bargaining agreement because the trade unions here have also encouraged an increasing fragmentation.

Earlier this year, 2,000 Hesse bus drivers conducted a fundamental struggle against wage cutting, which Verdi deliberately isolated from the rest of the public service. These bus drivers did not even receive the job ticket that is now being celebrated as the most significant achievement in the current deal, even though they work daily for local public transit.

With their approval of the Burqa ban, Verdi and the GEW have proved that it was neither a coincidence nor an exception when the IG Metall recently let the far right Alternative for Germany participate in the union-organised march in Görlitz when workers at the train builders Bombardier demonstrated against job cuts.



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