

German newspaper *Die Zeit* and SPD back #MeToo witch-hunt

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The #MeToo campaign has reached Germany. A recent edition of the weekly *Die Zeit* accused the well-known television director Dieter Wedel, who is 75, of sexually harassing actresses and forcing them to engage in sexual intercourse.

The magazine of *Die Zeit* devoted no less than 20 pages to accounts by former actresses, some of them cited anonymously, who recalled sexual offences allegedly carried out by Wedel over 20 years ago. A number of statements by *Die Zeit* employees at the end of the report called for the expansion of the #MeToo campaign in Germany and its transformation into a “mass movement.”

In early October of last year, the *New York Times* published allegations of sexual abuse against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein. Since then, the witch-hunt of alleged “sexual predators” has assumed hysterical forms, continually seeking new victims, especially in cultural and media circles. In addition to Harvey Weinstein, well-known artists such as the musical director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, James Levine, and actors Dustin Hoffman, Kevin Spacey and Geoffrey Rush have been targeted. Democratic Senator Al Franken has also been publicly stigmatised and forced to resign.

Until now, the reaction in Germany had been relatively muted. Last November, the prominent German film director Volker Schlöndorff dismissed the allegations against Dustin Hoffman by a former intern (relating to an alleged incident in 1985) as a “ridiculous accusation.”

Die Zeit, which is closely linked to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), is now determined to shift the agenda. It sent out a string of reporters to collect as much dirt as possible against film and theatre director Dieter Wedel. Former actresses Jana Tempel and Patricia Thielemann, as well as an anonymous “witness,” were allowed to report in lascivious detail the alleged misdeeds of Wedel. The reporters played the role of the instigators.

They interviewed friends, acquaintances and casting agents from that time. One casting agent died a month before the *Zeit* report. The reporters also interviewed a psychotherapist who was treating Jana Tempel. They collected statements and even diary notes from the mother of Jana Tempel’s former partner about her meeting with Dieter Wedel. The newspaper clearly spent a great deal of money to conduct its research.

Dieter Wedel has rejected the accusations in a legal statement. He has denied Tempel’s accusation that he was wearing a bathrobe when she had a conversation with him about casting in his hotel room.

He declared, “I was definitely never violent. I did not ‘grab’ her, ‘push her against the wall’ or ‘force’ her to have sexual intercourse.” He also rejected Thielemann’s report that in 1991 he “pounced on her, tore her blouse and threw her onto a couch” at an audition in his Hamburg hotel suite.

The director is known for his sexual escapades. He has made no secret of them, boasting in his autobiography of his exploits with various actresses. He has six children by six women, including the well-known actress Hannelore Elsner. For a period of time he had a relationship with two different women. One may not approve of such conduct, but it remains his own business as long as he did not commit a crime. The former actresses interviewed by *Die Zeit* never reported any offences nor pressed for criminal charges.

The presumption of innocence for offences allegedly committed 20 years ago is brushed aside by *Die Zeit*. Recalling the standards of the Middle Ages, the newspaper publicly pillories an acclaimed director who has received a host of awards for his television dramas and directed the Theatre Festival at Bad Hersfeld for many years.

The campaign to win support for #MeToo in Germany has gained the backing of circles in the cultural and entertainment industry, the media, politics and among academics. The liberal commentator Heribert Prantl went so far in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as to propose the biblical Mary, “no humble holy housewife,” as a role model for “the courage of the women who are outing today under #MeToo.”

Totalitarian climate

However, opposition to this witch-hunt is growing. Well-known actresses such as Jutta Speidel and Sonja Kirchberger have sided with Wedel. Kirchberger described the 75-year-old director as a “lover of women” who “is also as appealing to the female sex.” On the set, women have “sometimes aggressively made advances to him,” Kirchberger told the *Bild* newspaper. “They stood in line—and there were many well-known actresses.”

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Jutta Speidel said, “I think #MeToo is a difficult topic. Rape and harassment cannot be excused, but it must also be made clear to a woman that it is wrong to get a role by giving sexual favours.” She added that she

found “acts of revenge 20 years later, as is now the case with Dieter Wedel, borderline.”

Tagesspiegel editor Jost Müller-Neuhof asked if Wedel’s films would now be banned. He complained that anecdotes that “fill out an ugly picture...are in many cases regarded as a verdict...” He added that “character traits rather than facts are raised,” under conditions where “a judgment need not be justified, judges are absent, and instead of a prosecutor accusing the victim, the audience carries out the sentence.”

The criminologist Monika Frommel condemned the #MeToo campaign against Wedel in an article on *Legal Tribune Online* titled “The Commercialization of Indignation.” Here, she said, “no distinction is made between provable and invented stories.” The fact that “basic legal principles such as the presumption of innocence not only lose all meaning, but are actually turned into their opposite, i.e., ‘presumption of guilt,’ is unfortunately evident,” declared the professor, whose main focus is criminology from a feminist perspective, especially sexual criminal law and its reforms. The victims, she added, were “genuinely badly damaged victims.”

In France, a statement was released in *Le Monde* by some 100 women artists, scientists and journalists and signed by the famous actress Catherine Deneuve and the French author Catherine Millet. It warned of a “climate like a totalitarian society” as a result of the #MeToo campaign. “Rape is a crime,” it stated. “But clumsily hitting on someone or awkward flirting is not a crime, and gallantry is not chauvinist aggression.” The statement quickly won broad support on both French and German social media.

The letter goes on to say that #MeToo has launched a “campaign of denunciations and public accusations” and put the accused on a par with sexual aggressors, without allowing them to defend themselves. “This fever of leading the ‘pigs’ to the slaughterhouse...actually serves the interests of the enemies of sexual freedom, of religious extremists, the worst reactionaries,” the authors write in *Le Monde*.

It is no accident that the German #MeToo campaign is being led by a newspaper close to the SPD, which has adopted the issue in the wake of its disastrous result in last autumn’s federal election. Already last October, former Labour Minister Andrea Nahles and Family Minister Katarina Barley (both SPD) stated that #MeToo was “immensely important.”

“In cases of assault like a hand on a knee, we should be sharper legally,” Barley told *Zeit-online* on 22 October. However, when her comment failed to trigger the hoped-for public outrage, Barley went further. In an interview with the *taz* on 28 November, she lamented the “more lenient mentality” in Germany and praised Sweden, where there have been a number of #MeToo demonstrations and the issue of gender equality is higher on the agenda than in Germany.

“Just look at the government there,” Barley said, noting that “half of the ministries are in female hands.” She continued, “In business, women on supervisory boards and executive committees are a matter of course.” If women had more managerial functions, they would be more “sensitive” to topics such as #MeToo. Barley concluded: “I think we have to make the leap beyond the voyeuristic. Who did what when—in the end it’s not just about a

hand on one knee, it’s about power.”

In fact, the SPD is not concerned about women’s rights, or even about sexual violence. The party that introduced the Agenda 2010 and Hartz regulations has forced hundreds of thousands of women to take low-wage and part-time jobs, massively increasing poverty for women when they retire. The party is quite content to ignore the plight of women today who can no longer pay their rent and are forced to live on the street, where they face a real danger of sexual violence.

Confusion surrounds the issue of the #MeToo campaign because it presents itself as a vehicle for women’s rights. But this is just as misguided as the claim by the SPD and Greens that the German Army is in Afghanistan to bolster human rights and help build schools for Afghan girls.

The #MeToo inquisitors in *Die Zeit* and the SPD ignore the consequences of imperialist wars that have forced hundreds and thousands of women to flee countries where the German Army is active. Nor do they care about the disastrous consequences of Germany’s policy of deportation that has plunged many refugee families into misery.

The former party of social reforms has long since degenerated into a party of state officials, union bureaucrats and executives. It is now attempting to whip up an antidemocratic hysteria among a layer of the upper-middle class and academia, and use #MeToo to prepare a turn to the right in foreign and domestic policy in the face of broad popular opposition.

The huge media campaign exaggerating incidents of sexual assault in the city of Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015 in the SPD-led state of North Rhine-Westphalia already served this goal, as well as the police violence at the G20 summit last summer in the SPD-governed city-state of Hamburg.

Progressive movements look very different. On December 9, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote of the #MeToo campaign in the US: “Progressive social movements have certain essential characteristics, of which the most significant is their broadly egalitarian and democratic content. In the modern world, they are invariably and inseparably connected with the struggle of the working class against capitalist exploitation... Opposition to real instances of sexual abuse and all forms of anti-human cruelty and exploitation is a class issue, requiring the mobilization of the working class against capitalism. The motto that animates the struggle for human progress is not ‘Me Too’ but ‘Workers of the World Unite.’”



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