

Berlin film festival: SPD cabinet minister promotes #MeToo campaign

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The Berlin Film Festival has a reputation for taking up contemporary political issues and debates. This year's festival (February 15-25) featured a number of films dealing with important issues such as the fate of refugees.

The media circus at this year's Berlinale, however, was all centred on one topic: the #MeToo sexual misconduct witch-hunt. Virtually every interview, meeting and media report mentioned #MeToo in one way or another. In fact, the campaign against "sexual harassment" in the cultural industry deliberately distracts attention from the political and social developments that should motivate artists, cultural activists and the public.

The conservative Union parties (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which are preparing to form an extreme anti-working-class and militaristic government, played an integral role in promoting the #MeToo campaign at the Berlin film festival. At the opening gala, the Commissioner for Culture and the Media Monika Grütters (CDU) declared: "We are rolling out the carpet for #MeToo as well".

At the start of the festival, the SPD's Katarina Barley, both Minister of Labour and Social Affairs and Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, was the main speaker at the #MeToo event "Culture Wants Change: A Round Table on Sexual Harassment and Violence in the Film and Television Industry". The February 19 meeting was organized by the federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, the ProQuote Film Initiative and the federal theatre union and took place in the cabaret tent of the Tipi Theater, right next to the Chancellery.

Barley emerged last year as a leading figure in the #MeToo movement in Germany. The minister now welcomed the "earthquake" that had unleashed #MeToo and told a few hundred visitors—including many women from the film and culture industry—that it was "good" that no report from the Berlinale could fail to address the topic. Women experienced "sexual violence every day and therefore we have to change something here and now".

Barley complained that power was "structurally male in our society" and called for the introduction of a quota system. It was important to bring "women into responsible positions". In this context, she praised the coalition agreement between the SPD and CDU-CSU, which had set the goal of equality of women. The coalition paper states: "Women are still under-represented in leadership positions. In the past legislature period we set a milestone with the law providing for more women in leadership positions. We will continue on this path".

The mere fact that Barley referred to the coalition agreement in her embrace of #MeToo shows the reactionary character of the campaign. The grand coalition currently being formed will be the most right-wing government in the history of the German federal republic. It plans militarization both at home and abroad on a scale unknown since the end of World War II. The coalition paper, which Barley praised on numerous occasions, advocates a huge increase in the defense budget and a brutal refugee and deportation policy that parallels demands raised by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Barley is preparing to play a leading role in the new government. In a speech in mid-February, she raised the prospect of becoming Germany's foreign minister, referring to herself as the "universal weapon" of the SPD. Barley currently fills the posts of family and labor minister, and is intimately associated with policies that have plunged thousands of female workers and their families into poverty via the Hartz IV laws and brutal cutbacks across the entire social sector—from child care to retirement.

Barley has the audacity to talk about "structural violence"? She is a leading member of a party that creates the conditions on a daily basis for sexual and other forms of violence under capitalism. Insecure family relationships, often characterized by violence, alcoholism and drugs abuse, insecure living conditions for many young people, stress at work, housing shortages, depression—all these conditions are the result of decades of SPD rule with Barley playing a leading role, as former SPD general secretary and as

government minister.

Bourgeois politicians such as Barley are living proof that the demand for women in positions of authority has no progressive content whatsoever. Chancellor Angela Merkel not only led the shift to the right in Germany, but also helped impose austerity measures in Greece and other European countries that have decimated those countries' social fabric.

Germany's defence minister Ursula von der Leyen is equipping the German army to carry out wars across the globe and recently gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference arguing for war. Internationally, the situation is no better: International Monetary Fund head Christine Lagarde and Democratic Party presidential candidate and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—two despised representatives of the global financial elite—have also pledged their allegiance to #MeToo and identity politics.

Should Barley take over at the foreign office she will press forward with the program of reviving German militarism—as did previous Social Democratic foreign ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel. The coalition is planning a massive escalation of its war plans and the fortification of Europe. It is precisely such policies that force millions of people to become refugees, exposing them to sexual violence and repression in the process.

With their support for the #MeToo movement, Barley and the SPD are pursuing deeply reactionary goals. On the one hand, the SPD wants to divert attention at all costs from the anti-working class agenda and war program of the government. On the other hand, the government parties use #MeToo as a vehicle to mobilise layers of middle class women, especially in the spheres of media and culture. In return, the latter are given funds and new career opportunities. Hysterical media campaigns concentrating on sexual harassment are well suited to strengthening the state apparatus, introducing new laws and censorship.

Barley herself has used the #MeToo question from the start to promote harsher laws. At the February 19 meeting, she boasted that the grand coalition, under the slogan “No means no”, had tightened up criminal law for sex offences. Finally, “groping” could be punished as a crime.

The far-reaching ratcheting up of criminal law for sex offences in the summer of 2016 was preceded by a months-long racist media campaign based on the “events” alleged to have taken place in Cologne on New Year's Eve. At the time, it was claimed that a mob of Arab men had massively harassed and raped women. Although it soon turned out the media campaign was largely baseless and that what happened on New Year's Eve was no more than what unfortunately took place at other major events, the campaign had achieved its desired consequences: a strengthening of right-wing forces such as Pegida and AfD and the public

mood necessary to tighten up the law and strengthen the powers of the police.

In the course of the incitement against Muslim men, which filled the pages of newspapers after Cologne, feminists like Alice Schwarzer allied with openly right-wing forces. This alliance was no coincidence. The #MeToo movement, which draws from anti-democratic and reactionary traditions, also emboldens the most right-wing tendencies.

This was evident at the February 19 meeting when a group labelling itself #120db—a part of the far-right German Identity movement—stormed the podium. The extreme right-wingers threw flyers into the audience to the sound of a siren and unrolled a poster with the text “The voice of forgotten women”. The words refer to women who are allegedly victims of “imported violence”—i.e., sexual assaults committed by immigrants.

The fact that this racist rabble could show their faces is a result of the policies of the establishment parties, especially the SPD. They have created the basis for the growth of far-right forces such as Pegida and the AfD. Now they are integrating the AfD into official politics.

The reaction of the podium to the short appearance of the far-right crowd was also significant. Cries of “Nazis out!” were heard from the audience, but from the podium, Barbara Rohm, co-founder and chair of the ProQuote Film Initiative, declared one must “also talk to these young women”. None of the podium speakers countered or criticised the extreme right provocation. Instead, the moderator and FAZ journalist Verena Lueken continued the superficial conversation as if nothing had happened.

Although many artists supported the #MeToo movement during the Berlinale, there were also critical and skeptical voices. Some expressed weariness over the endless questions from journalists about #MeToo. The demand for a black carpet instead of a red carpet at the Berlinale to give a “signal” for #MeToo also met with widespread incomprehension. Austrian film director Michael Haneke had sharply disparaged the sexual witch-hunt before the Berlinale, and German actresses Heike Makatsch and Hanna Schygulla also criticized the movement.



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