German Social Democrats launch xenophobic campaign about child benefits

Christopher Lehmann
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In the spring, the German government used the so-called BAMF affair, in which the Federal Office for Immigration and Refugees (BAMF) office in Bremen was accused of wrongfully granting asylum to more than a thousand refugees between 2013 and 2016 whose applications had been dismissed in other federal states, in order to whip up anti-refugee sentiment.

Now, it is launching its next xenophobic campaign.

On last Thursday's "Tagesthemen" TV news programme, Social Democratic Party (SPD) mayor Sören Link ranted against European Union (EU) nationals who were allegedly flocking to Germany to fraudulently obtain social welfare payments such as child benefits. Since then, leading Social Democrats have been banging the drum for cuts in child support payments to families of European workers and plying racist sentiments in the style of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), among other things.

"We have about 19,000 people from Romania and Bulgaria in Duisburg, Sinti and Roma. In 2012, we only had 6,000," Link agitated. "They do not come for work, but for social benefits." He had to "deal with people here, who spill rubbish on the streets and exacerbate the rat problem." Neighbours felt "disturbed by mountains of garbage, noise and rat infestations." He had set up a task force to "tackle" the alleged "problem properties" of the Sinti and Roma.

Link's statements are no different from those of the far-right. In a Facebook post on August 9, the AfD parliamentary group leader Alice Weidel wrote almost word for word: "More and more child support is flowing into other European countries. ... In addition, many cities are sounding the alarm because they can no longer cope with the great immigration of poverty. In Duisburg alone, the number of Roma and Sinti increased by 13,000 to 19,000 within six years. Mayors of many cities speak of a 'targeted migration into the social system.'"

The chairman of the Central Council of Sinti and Roma in Germany, Romani Rose, sharply criticised Link's statements: "Racist stereotypes are being deliberately used here to produce scapegoats—even at the risk of violent attacks."

The SPD is aware of the dangerous consequences of its policy. According to the federal government, there were more than 700 attacks on refugees and refugee shelters in the first half of 2018 alone. According to the government, the offences include grievous bodily harm, aggravated arson, property damage, incitement, libel and violations of the weapons law. Altogether, 120 people had been injured in xenophobic attacks.

Despite this, the Social Democrats are pushing ahead with their right-wing campaign. SPD leader Andrea Nahles has announced a summit meeting with mayors and local politicians on September 27 under the slogan "Partial problems in the work migration complex" in order to curtail the social rights of EU nationals in Germany. "What we need to tackle urgently, for example, are the scams surrounding family and social benefits," she said.

Among other things, Nahles and her party colleague and federal finance minister, Olaf Scholz, want to push through a so-called indexation of child benefits at European level. What that means was made clear by Hamburg Mayor Peter Tschentscher (SPD): "The amount of child support must be based on the cost of living of the country in which the child resides," he said on Friday. "The previous regulation leads to disincentives. The corresponding European regulations must be adapted accordingly."

The plans of the SPD violate existing European law and have therefore been repeatedly rejected in the past

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by the European Commission. EU citizens are entitled to “seek work in another EU country” and “live there for that purpose,” the European Commission writes on its web site. EU nationals must be treated “just like nationals of the host country” in terms of access to employment, working conditions and all other social benefits and tax benefits.

The SPD’s campaign aims to divide the working class and divert it from the widening gulf between rich and poor and advance the grand coalition’s right-wing policy of social cutbacks, militarism and state armament. Like the alleged abuses in BAMF, the allegations about supposed child benefit abuse are completely fictitious.

In an interview with *Die Zeit*, the spokesman of the Federal Employment Agency, Christian Weinert, said there had “so far been no evidence of abuse of child benefit claims by families whose children live abroad.” The number of children entitled to child benefit from other EU countries would rise, “because there are also more employees from these countries in Germany.” The number of employees from the eastern European countries of the EU has “increased in the past two years by 295,000, to over 1 million. And anyone who works and pays social insurance contributions here is also entitled to child benefit, in most cases.”

According to government figures, the number of children living outside Germany in the EU or in the European Economic Area and receiving child benefits has increased by 7.2 percent since the previous year. This concerns just 268,336 children, of whom 31,512 have a German passport. As of the end of June, around 3 million out of a total of 15.29 million children receiving child support have foreign papers, most of whom live and work in Germany.

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