

Duisburg, Germany: Social democratic mayor agitates against refugees and migrants from Eastern Europe

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In early August, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) mayor of the city of Duisburg, Sören Link, was allowed to broadcast his racist demagogic on primetime German television. On one of Germany's leading channels he claimed citizens from other EU countries were flocking to Germany to cash in on social benefits such as child support.

Link concentrated his agitation on impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially from Bulgaria and Romania. In particular, he accused Sinti and Roma of "littering the streets and exacerbating the rat problem." Such racist remarks recall the Nazi propaganda directed against Sinti and Roma and more recently the racist outbursts of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The chairman of the central council of Sinti and Roma in Germany, Romani Rose, answered sharply and demanded an apology. He accused the SPD mayor of using "racist stereotypes to deliberately produce scapegoats—even at the risk of violent attacks."

Crimes against Sinti and Roma in recent centuries are well known. During the Nazi dictatorship they first lost their German citizenship, then many of them were interned in camps from the mid-1930s and compelled to do forced labor.

Children were excluded from schools. Many adult Sinti and Roma were affected by prohibitions and many other forms of harassment.

Special registers, which already existed in the Weimar Republic, were expanded by the Nazis and used from the end of the 1930s to deport not only Jews but also many Sinti and Roma to concentration camps. Together with other peoples from Nazi-occupied countries in Europe, about half a million Sinti and

Roma were murdered in extermination camps.

Even after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, Sinti and Roma in the Federal Republic were not recognised as victims of National Socialism. Survivors were long refused their German citizenship, which had been withdrawn by the Nazis, leaving them stateless and unable to claim compensation for their persecution during the Nazi era. It was not until 1982 that the murder of the Sinti and Roma was officially recognised as racist genocide.

Despite this brutal and bitter history, the SPD mayor is quite prepared to intensify his incitement against Sinti and Roma. In a short article in the weekly magazine of the FAZ newspaper last month, Link rejected the criticisms made by Romani Rose. Link denied that his comments on Sinti and Roma were racist, rejected Rose's request for an apology and instead attacked him, claiming: "This sort of reproach is aimed at curtailing any real discussion of the matter."

Link's demand for a restriction of child support payments for EU citizens from Eastern Europe is supported by a number of other SPD politicians. In particular, the chairperson of the SPD, Andrea Nahles, has declared her support for action at a national level against "this abuse." She has invited mayors and local politicians to a meeting at the end of this month to address the issue, with the title: "Partial problems in the entire complex of labour migration."

Link has also received support from the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia. It has announced its intention to set up a "Southeastern Europe Task Force" with the aim of detecting "fraud" by foreign recipients of child support and the "appropriation" of other social benefits.

Recently, Link also called for the establishment of a nationwide system of refugee camps along the lines of the “anchor centres” introduced by right-wing German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU). Link’s aim is to incarcerate asylum seekers whose status is still unclear in closed camps and deport them as soon as possible. On this issue, Link is once again in line with the reactionary and anti-refugee policies of the SPD policy at federal level.

Just a few days ago Link also demanded a change in the law relating to low-wage, part-time mini-jobs. In an interview with the WAZ newspaper last Saturday, he said, “The situation has to stop where one parent living in Duisburg enables all children living in Bulgaria or Romania to get child support from the German state.”

He claimed that the immigration from these countries was often carried out by a criminal network of smugglers, “which brings people from deepest poverty to Duisburg, provides them with self-employment mini-jobs and thus fraudulent top-up funds.”

Link, formerly long-time head of the SPD youth organisation (Jusos) in Duisburg, shows the true face of the SPD, which governs the country in a coalition with Seehofer’s CSU, whose policies are determined by the extreme right-wing agenda of the AfD.

While the SPD mayor agitates against the poorest of the poor, accusing migrants from Eastern Europe of involvement in criminal activities, his demand for the abolition of top-up funds (Hartz IV) for mini-jobs, and in general for low-wage work, is directed against the entire working class. In the cities of the de-industrialised Ruhr region, many workers are forced to top up their incomes with Hartz IV social payments because their wages are not enough to survive.

The main responsibility for this low-wage sector lies with the SPD and Greens, who initiated the introduction of the Hartz laws in 2003 under the government of Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer. Likewise, the main responsibility for the social problems in cities like Duisburg rests with the SPD, which has traditionally headed the government and filled the post of mayor in the Ruhr area with only a few exceptions.

Problems such as the decline of entire districts, dilapidated schools, a lack of youth centres, swimming pools or other social facilities are the result of decades of austerity at the expense of workers and the poor,

regardless of their national origin. While there is no money when it comes to social needs, millions are squandered on prestige projects.

For example, costs for the construction of the state archive in Duisburg soared from an original €50 million to €190 million, an increase of 368 percent.

Link heads a city administration where corruption and nepotism dominate and the super-rich set the agenda. A good example is Roselynn Rogg. She was the boss of the city’s handicapped workshop and doubled her annual salary to €370,000 within a short time. The disabled people who work in the workshop earned the ridiculously low average wage of €1,522 per year in 2016.

The state prosecutor is currently investigating the case of the now dismissed Rogg and the former chairman of the board of urban enterprises and long-time social affairs department in Duisburg, Reinhold Spaniel (SPD). Spaniel was allegedly the only person to know of and approve the salary increase for Rogg.



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