

Profits before human life: German parliament president Schäuble wins broad support in the establishment

Peter Schwarz
30 April 2020

With his statement that saving human life should not be society's first priority, German parliament president Wolfgang Schäuble has triggered a discussion about "worthless lives." On the 75th anniversary of Hitler's suicide in the Führer bunker, Germany's ruling elite is once again discussing how many human lives should be sacrificed for corporate profit.

In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel*, Schäuble said, "But when I hear that everything must take second place to the protection of life, then I must say: that is not right in such an absolute sense." He continued, "If there is one absolute value in our Basic Law, then it is the dignity of the person." This is inviolable. "But that does not exclude us from having to die," he added.

Under conditions in which the coronavirus reproduction rate in Germany is increasing and the pandemic is raging internationally, this can only mean that countless lives must be sacrificed to boost the revenues and profits of big business.

The reproduction rate reveals how many people are infected by someone who has coronavirus. In Germany, the rate reached its lowest level of 0.7 some 12 days ago. According to the Robert Koch Institute, it has climbed back up to 1.0, and the impact of the easing of restrictions over the past week will only make itself felt in the figures over the coming days. Experts therefore expect a second wave of the pandemic.

This has not stopped leading representatives from Germany's parliamentary parties speaking out in support of Schäuble and demanding the lifting of the protective measures that remain in place.

Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Christian Lindner expressed this view most clearly, asserting that for his "party of high-income earners," human lives, especially those of workers and pensioners, were merely a "cost factor."

On the *Welt* television channel, Lindner explicitly backed Schäuble. "The protection of life is of course a high priority, but it's always a question of weighing up priorities," the FDP leader said. The severe restrictions on public life have "such a high cost factor" that Lindner believes another route than the one pursued over recent weeks should be taken. "So please, open businesses, get education institutions going, make gastronomy and production possible."

There was also applause from the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD). The AfD's parliamentary group

leader, Alexander Gauland, stated, "Parliament president Schäuble is absolutely right on this. When the treatment of an illness begins to do more harm than the illness itself, the treatment must be ended."

The Greens, who never miss an opportunity to offer their services to big business and the financial elite, did not want to be left out of the general enthusiasm.

Green co-leader Robert Habeck agreed with Schäuble's statement that the protection of human life does not justify "everything and anything" in such an absolute sense. The state has a high duty of care for life. The health care system cannot be allowed to collapse. But "everything and anything" is wrong. A dilemma in a democracy is normal, and politicians have to put up with that, he continued.

The leader of the Greens' parliamentary group in the federal parliament, Katrin Göring-Eckardt, told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that the state had to protect human life, "but one must always remember that life is much more than just surviving."

The mayor of Tübingen, Boris Palmer, who has long expounded the right-wing core of Green politics, argued on the television channel Sat.1's breakfast show, "I'll put it bluntly: we're possibly saving people who would probably be dead in six months anyway due to their age or pre-existing medical conditions."

If Palmer got his way, the pandemic could be left to wipe out the elderly, who only cost more money. "If you look at the coronavirus deaths, it is often the case that many people over the age of 80 die," he said. "And we know that most people over 80 die at some point."

The Green Party politician, who usually advocates the strict deportation of refugees, is now cynically seeking to play off the lives of German pensioners against the poverty in developing countries. The poverty shock triggered by the global economic collapse produced by the isolation measures will cost the lives of millions of children, he said.

Schäuble also received backing from theologians, jurists and cultural figures, for whom the defence of capitalism and their privileges is far more important than the protection of the lives of pensioners and workers.

The chairman of the German Ethics Council, Peter Dabrock, explicitly welcomed Schäuble's remarks. "We cannot in principle

put the length of life ahead of the quality of life,” he told financial daily *Handelsblatt*.

The Ethics Council had already noted in recent weeks that everything else could not be subordinated to the protection of human life, Dabrock pointed out. “When the man who is formally second in line to the head of state makes such a statement, it carries the full weight of the state.”

Former constitutional judge Gertrude Lübke-Wolff told *Handelsblatt*, “We must always take account of the capacity of the state to act, on which we rely for freedom and health in equal measure, and the limits of that capacity.” There is no “lexical ranking” among the basic rights. Although the Federal Constitutional Court defined the right to life as a “core value,” this does not mean “that everything else has to retreat behind the protection of life and health in principle.”

Frank Castorf, the well-known theatre director and longtime artistic director of the Volksbühne, one of Berlin’s leading theatres, who is also close to the Left Party, opposes the coronavirus restrictions with particular venom. In a piece with the infantile headline, “I don’t want to be told by Mrs. [Angela] Merkel that I have to wash my hands,” he called in an interview with *Der Spiegel* (the weekly newsmagazine) for “republican resistance” against the coronavirus restrictions.

In light of the current fatality rate and the deaths of 6,000 people in Germany, Castorf believes that it is “always sad when someone dies, including an elderly person. But that’s just the way things are and we have to accept it. We are born with death, that is a philosophical platitude. The theatre is there to remind us that we can’t abolish death.”

“Just like the idea of a socialist community of the people was propagated by the politicians during the era of the GDR [Stalinist East Germany, in which Castorf grew up],” the director continued, so today “the social obligation to save everyone from death is propagated.” He has “never felt so confined before in my life.” The regulations and laws are “an incision into our Western normality. I am being ordered what to do, what to think.”

Castorf ended the interview by acknowledging, “I admit with horror that I like Trump. Because he doesn’t dance to the same tune.” The “anger towards Trump,” stated the director, “is the illness of we Germans, the madness of this small people in Central Europe that led us to Stalingrad and back.”

In front of the Volksbühne in Berlin, where Castorf is currently directing an adaptation of an Erich Kästner novel, a few hundred demonstrators have been gathering on recent weekends to protest the restrictions imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus. Even the Left Party organ *Neues Deutschland* was compelled to acknowledge, “Originally planned as a left-wing action, the protest seems to have been completely taken over by the right.”

Schäuble’s claim that a contrast exists between the protection of life and human dignity is false even from a legal standpoint. Article I of Germany’s Basic Law, “Human dignity is inviolable. It shall be the obligation of all state power to respect and protect it,” was a direct response to the Nazi dictatorship’s crimes, which subordinated human dignity to the alleged “interests of the people” and “the will of the Führer,” and ultimately exterminated millions of “worthless lives” in concentration camps, forced labour, and

euthanasia programmes.

The fact that the protection of human dignity includes the protection of “the right to life and bodily integrity” (Article II) is self-evident. Nonetheless, the Federal Constitutional Court confirmed this point at length in 2005, when it overturned the Air Security Law, which would have legalised the shooting down of hijacked passenger planes. The ruling stated that the law was incompatible with the right to life and guarantee of human dignity contained in the Basic Law, because to the extent that weapons were used, innocent people on board would be affected.

Schäuble, who became Interior Minister for the second time that year, sharply attacked the ruling and sought to have it thrown out by means of a constitutional change. Only after the president of the Federal Constitutional Court at the time, Hans-Jürgen Papier, warned him publicly that the “guarantee of human dignity” could not be “limited by means of a constitutional amendment,” did Schäuble abandon his plan.

The fact that Schäuble is now once again calling into question the protection of human life and is receiving support from the entire official political spectrum is intimately bound up with the crisis of capitalism exposed by the coronavirus pandemic. While the virus and its spread are natural processes that experts have long been warning about, the political response to it is not.

The years-long savaging of the health service, the plundering of social resources by hedge funds, banks, and the super-rich, the creation of a huge low-wage sector in which millions of workers do not earn enough to make ends meet: all of these processes have left society utterly unprepared for the pandemic. Even elementary protective measures, such as the purchasing of masks and medical gowns for doctors and health care workers, were not carried out.

The ruling class views the coronavirus pandemic above all as an opportunity to intensify the transfer of social wealth from the bottom to the top. While the banks and big business receive trillions in public funds and the stock markets are rising once again, workers are being laid off or forced back into the factories to risk their lives.

To this end, the ruling elite is literally prepared to trample over corpses. Capitalism is based, as Karl Marx demonstrated in his masterwork *Capital*, on the exploitation of human labour power. The Nazis took this exploitation to the most extreme forms of brutality. Millions of forced labourers from almost all occupied countries worked themselves to death in German factories during the war. Experts worked out how they could be most effectively exploited with as few calories as possible before they died.

These traditions are being revived. There is no other way to explain the enthusiasm of the ruling elite, and its repulsive court jester Castorf, for Schäuble’s contempt for the protection of human life. The time is ripe for the overthrow of capitalism by a socialist movement of the international working class.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact