

Far-right protest against COVID-19 restrictions in Berlin: A put-up job

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According to police reports, an estimated 20,000 participants gathered in Berlin last Saturday to protest against Germany's Corona protection measures. The protest was a predictable, put-up job, which closely resembled the scenario of the Pegida demonstrations held five years ago.

Far-right figures and organisations that pull the strings behind the scenes and maintain close links to the Verfassungsschutz (Germany's domestic secret service), the police and the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) called the protest, and mobilised a broad coalition of confused, frustrated and eccentric individuals. Political circles and the German media then inflated the whole issue, took the moral high ground and criticised the crude slogans of the demonstrators while declaring at the same time that those taking part were "concerned citizens" whose concerns had to be "taken seriously." In so doing they were able to divert attention from their own reactionary policies and push the political climate further to the right.

The Pegida demonstrations were used in a similar way to sabotage the "welcoming culture," whereby broad sections of the German population welcomed refugees from war-ravaged countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and to intimidate all those supporting the refugees.

Journalists worked their fingers to the bone with articles which concluded that—in the words of the right-wing extremist historian Jörg Baberowski—"it naturally ends in aggression ... wherever many people come from foreign contexts" and when the population is not involved. According to this logic, the refugees—i.e., the victims of the far right—were responsible for the growth of right-wing extremism.

The Corona demonstration in Berlin followed the same pattern. Many of those agitating behind the scenes were among the same people behind the Pegida demonstrations, i.e., neo-Nazis, far-right Reichbürger, supporters of the AfD, the neo-Nazi NPD and the conspiracy theorist QAnon movement, who travelled from all over Germany to Berlin. These forces were joined by opponents of vaccination, Corona deniers and so-called "angry citizens," together with members of Berlin's party crowd.

The police watched patiently as the participants disregarded Corona distancing and mask regulations, waved illegal Reich

flags and displayed unconstitutional symbols. In contrast to the G20 protests in Hamburg or the recent demonstrations against the murder of George Floyd, where police resorted to the use of pepper spray and water cannons at the slightest opportunity, not a single police officer could be seen along broad stretches of the march. Only after half an hour of the final rally had passed did police officially declare that the protest was ended due to non-compliance with hygiene rules. At the same time, police made no move to break up the demonstration.

Afterwards, leading politicians and the media frothed at the mouth regarding the non-compliance with official hygiene regulations. "Demonstrations should be possible, also in a period of Corona ... but not like this," twittered the German Health Minister Jens Spahn (CDU). Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht (SPD) declared she had no sympathy for demonstrators who high-handedly ignored Corona precautions. Economics Minister Peter Altmaier (CDU) called for tougher penalties: "Those who deliberately endanger others must expect serious consequences." SPD leader Saskia Esken angrily referred to "covididiots."

These expressions of outrage were aimed at diverting attention from the policies of these very same politicians. The anti-social behaviour of the demonstrators last Saturday pales in comparison with their own criminal response. Germany's federal and state governments, run by various coalitions involving the CDU, CSU, SPD, Greens, FDP and Left Party, are all pursuing a policy of opening up society and the economy that threatens the lives of hundreds of thousands.

As the worldwide number of infected persons approaches 20 million, with the number of fatalities now exceeding 700,000, the number of cases in Germany is again rising significantly. Currently tens of thousands of holiday makers are returning home, having been encouraged to travel abroad by the lifting of travel warnings. At airports in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where almost half of the returnees voluntarily applied for a Corona test, 2.5 percent proved positive, an extremely high figure.

Despite this, schools are opening up across the country, starting with Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania next week, although it has been proven that schools, with their cramped classrooms and dilapidated infrastructure, are an ideal

environment for mass infections.

The Viennese research group Complexity Science Hub, which has statistically evaluated Corona data from 76 regions, concluded that the closure of schools, kindergartens and universities was an “extremely effective means” to limit infection. According to an analysis published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, school closures saved more than 40,000 lives and prevented 1.3 million infections in the US alone.

Conversely, a study by the Technical University of Berlin shows that aerosol concentration in the air of a classroom—critical for transmission—is reached just two minutes after a single infected person in the room coughs. Despite this fact, schools are once again commencing operations at full capacity.

The hygiene measures that have been put in place, which vary from state to state, are risible. For example, the obligation to wear masks, which Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) is now advocating after initially rejecting the proposal, only applies from the school gate to the classroom, but not in the classroom itself, where the risk of infection is highest.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) also estimates the risk of infection to be high in a full classroom where minimum distance rules are not observed. This information is contained in a letter to the *Rheinische Post*. The prerequisites for maintaining this distance in classrooms are almost non-existent.

The RKI also warns against studies that attribute a significantly higher resistance on the part of children to coronavirus infection. It may well be that the alleged resistance of children is merely due to the fact that they had less social contact during the closure of kindergartens and schools, the RKI notes on its website.

Meanwhile, the media are trying to portray the Berlin demonstration staged by far-right manipulators as an expression of a broad mood within the population. In its lead commentary on Monday, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* claimed that when a five-figure number of people take to the streets in Berlin, “one must fear that what was being expressed were issues concerning hundreds of thousands, at least.”

Opinion polls prove the opposite. A recent survey conducted by the opinion research institute Civey for the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper concluded that 77 percent of those questioned would accept a tightening of contact restrictions if the number of infections rose again significantly. Only around 20 percent were opposed. According to the current Politbarometer, 77 percent also expect a second wave of coronavirus infections to occur soon.

The pressure to lift contact restrictions and open schools does not come from the population, but rather from business and finance interests together with their cronies in the media and political circles. Having transferred hundreds of billions of euros to the corporations and banks to guarantee the profits and fortunes of the rich, the government is seeking once again to

squeeze these sums out of the working class. The opening up of schools is a basic condition for parents to be fully available to the labour market and able to work. The drive for profits is being placed above the lives of millions of children and their families.

The neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists who set the tone at the Berlin demonstration have been deliberately encourage to create the necessary political climate for this policy. They are closely linked to the state apparatus, as was revealed most recently by the NSU murders, the murder of the politician Walter Lübcke and the uncovering of various far-right terror networks in the German army (Bundeswehr) and police.

Protecting the health and livelihoods of the population against the effects of the Corona pandemic is first and foremost a political task. It is only possible on the basis of a socialist programme that puts human and social need above the profit interests of big business.

One can only resolve the urgent problem of education and training within such a framework. It is perfectly possible to provide education in compliance with appropriate safety measures, but this requires that the huge funds currently being diverted into the accounts of the wealthy must be redirected to renovate dilapidated schools, rent additional rooms, purchase computers and IT technology, employ more teachers to instruct small groups, etc.

There is no shortage of ideas and initiatives from committed teachers and parents, but they are being rejected on the grounds of cost or blocked by bureaucratic means.

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) advocates the establishment of action committees in educational institutions and residential areas that function independently of the trade unions and establishment parties. Such committees are necessary to coordinate resistance to the life-threatening policy of opening up the economy.

Resistance to a system that subordinates every sphere of life to the profit interests of big business and finance is developing in factories, hospitals, transport and public services around the world. The SGP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to build a broad socialist mass movement.



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