German political satire show *Die Anstalt* bows to censorship in its 100th edition

Peter Schwarz
23 July 2026

When the satirical programme *Die Anstalt* (*The Mental Institute*) first went on air in February 2014, it brought a breath of fresh air to the German television landscape.

Max Uthoff and Claus von Wagner were not afraid to take on the powerful, following in the tradition of political satirists such as Dieter Hildebrandt and Georg Schramm at their best. Lawsuits and legal proceedings were their constant companions. None of that remains in the 100th edition, which aired on Tuesday on ZDF. The programme was marked by censorship and self-censorship.

Shortly before the recording of the programme—which has not been broadcast live since the pandemic—ZDF management cancelled the planned appearance of musician Daniel Pongratz (alias Danger Dan) and pianist Igor Levit, who had intended to give the world premiere of their anti-fascist song "Keine Angst" ("No Fear"). ZDF director Norbert Himmler justified this outrageous assault on artistic freedom and freedom of expression by branding the song "a set of instructions for left-wing, violence-prone resistance."

Yet neither Levit nor Pongratz is a left-winger. On central political questions—in particular the Gaza and Ukraine wars—they are entirely in line with government policy.

Levit, a classical pianist of world renown who received Germany's Federal Cross of Merit for his outstanding musical achievements, has repeatedly and courageously taken a stand against racism, antisemitism and the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), and has for that reason been sharply attacked by the German media. But since Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October 2023, he has increasingly become a defender of the Israeli state, even though he continues to take a critical stance towards the Netanyahu government.

Danger Dan's hip-hop group "Antilopen Gang" released a vile song against Palestinian solidarity that reproduces the positions of the German government and Israeli propaganda. The song "Oktober in Europa" states that today the "biggest antisemites are all anti-racists." The genocide in Gaza is justified with the line: "Civilians in Gaza are Hamas's human shield, a human shield for the descendants of the Jewish gassers." And "Greta" Thunberg is accused of hating Jews.

Yet although Danger Dan and Levit support the government on the war question, their call against the AfD went decisively too far for ZDF management. It evidently does not wish to antagonise the far-right party, which is being systematically built up as a party of government by large sections of official politics and the media.

"Keine Angst" calls for action rather than waiting the Nazis "grow stronger in the parliaments and on the streets before we fight them," and develops purportedly "appropriate ideas" to this end: founding anonymous activist groups, holding anti-Nazi parties, conducting spray-paint and sticker campaigns, building local antifa structures, systematically researching into right-wing structures, building an antifa archive, publishing names and addresses (doxing), informing schools, universities and employers about right-wing extremists, informing the local press. Perhaps the public prosecutor's office would then wake up, the song argues.

The song warns against relying on the security authorities and places great emphasis on secrecy and personal security: "But you'd be stupid to count on the German state. Experience shows exactly the opposite; there are so many fascists in the police." The refrain runs: "No fear, no fear…"

The song ends with the lines: "No fear, take it into your own hands. They look dangerous but we'll floor them. Coordinate yourselves, start training—if you fight together, it can work."

The final line reads: "Best wishes to Lina, Gucci, Maja and Nanuk"—a reference to Lina E., convicted by the Dresden Higher Regional Court in 2023 of attacks on far-right extremists and sentenced to more than five years' imprisonment, to Maja T., who received eight years in Budapest in 2026 for the same reason, as well as to other members of an alleged "Antifa East" network. The Trump administration placed this "Antifa East" on its terrorism list at the end of last year.

The presenters of *Die Anstalt* did not accept the censorship of their programme without protest. They called it "faint-hearted" and addressed it in their broadcast. The camera lingered at length on the empty piano at which Levit was supposed to have played. Uthoff, von Wagner and Maike Kühl then quoted ZDF's justification for the cancellation: the song called for violence and thereby violated programme guidelines. They then discussed passages from the controversial song.

But they were not prepared to mount a principled defence of Danger Dan and Igor Levit. The outrage of a call to resist a party that is in part neo-Nazi being censored at the highest level on German public television provoked no storm of indignation.

The entire programme amounted to self-censorship. The presenters complained that the cancellation had come at such short notice, even though "ZDF had had the lyrics of the song for weeks"—an admission that prior censorship of satirical texts at

© World Socialist Web Site

ZDF has by now become standard practice, with the audience none the wiser when censorship occurs early enough.

Uthoff, von Wagner and Kühl placed great emphasis on their rejection of "calls to vigilante justice and violence." They had to concede, however, that in some parts of eastern Germany there prevails a climate of fear and intimidation at the hands of far-right extremists, tolerated by the police. They posed the question: "What happens when the state fails to exercise its monopoly on the use of force and people are left unprotected against Nazis?" This debate was important, "which is why we would very much have wished the artist to be permitted to perform with us."

Their answer in this debate, however, runs in the opposite direction from that of Danger Dan and Levit, whose conception has undeniable weaknesses and is not capable of defeating fascism. But it acknowledges at least that the struggle against the AfD requires a broader mobilisation and cannot be left to the state.

The ruling class resorts to fascism when class antagonisms have become so acute that they can no longer be held in check by democratic means. That is why right-wing and fascist parties are on the rise in most imperialist countries—the United States, France, Germany, Italy—and enjoy considerable support precisely within the state apparatus. They are needed to suppress resistance to the dismantling of social provisions, inequality and militarism.

The defeat of fascism therefore requires the international mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme that combines resistance to war, fascism and social inequality with the struggle against their cause—capitalism. Political and physical confrontations with fascists, as Danger Dan and Levit advocate whilst rejecting such a perspective, are no substitute for this.

The presenters of *Die Anstalt* took an entirely different line. Their entire programme was oriented towards the demand for a state ban on the AfD. Such a ban on a party that is approaching the 30-percent mark in national polls and stands above 40 percent in some federal states would mean erecting a police state in the name of the "fight against the right." The police and intelligence services, which are riddled with AfD supporters, would be further strengthened. And they would inevitably deploy their power against opponents of capitalism.

Even now, the German Interior Ministry is working closely with the far-right Trump administration in the suppression of political opponents. Last week, senior Interior Ministry officials participated in an international conference at the US State Department which, under the guise of fighting "left-wing radical terrorism," prepared the suppression of political opponents. The next meeting is to be held in Germany.

At the conference, Trump's fascistic counter-terrorism adviser Stephen Miller declared: "One of the hallmarks of left-wing violence and terrorism is its entirely spurious and dishonest appeal to civil rights." Such appeals must "fall on deaf ears." The law must be applied with "total intransigence towards these enemies of civilisation."

In several sketches, the anniversary edition of *Die Anstalt* glorified bourgeois politicians who at one point or another had championed a ban on the Nazis or some other far-right party.

One of them is Robert Lehr, who in the Weimar Republic was a member of Alfred Hugenberg's right-wing nationalist German National People's Party (DNVP) and Mayor of Düsseldorf. The Nazis removed him from office, which qualified him after the war to become Interior Minister under Konrad Adenauer. In that capacity he pushed through the ban on the Socialist Reich Party (SRP) in 1952, which openly invoked the Nazi tradition. The Adenauer government—riddled with former Nazis—used this as an alibi.

The SRP ban served above all to prepare the ground for the ban on the German Communist Party (KPD) in August 1956. The KPD was dissolved, its assets confiscated, its parliamentary deputies stripped of their mandates. Numerous party members, many of whom had fought against the Nazis, lost their jobs, their savings and their freedom. Some were imprisoned by the very same judges who had already locked them up under the Nazis. Yet *Die Anstalt* celebrates Lehr as a model.

The author of the theory of "militant democracy," Karl Loewenstein, was also lauded in the programme. The jurist from a Jewish family had fled the Nazis to the United States and developed there his political model, which served as a blueprint for the post-war West German constitution. This extends democratic rights only to those who do not call the existing social system into question.

Particularly absurd was a sketch featuring Uthoff as Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Kühl as Left Party parliamentary group leader Heidi Reichinnek. In it, the war chancellor and former BlackRock manager is earnestly urged to collaborate with the Left Party against the AfD. In reality, such collaboration has long been under way at both state and federal level, where it has proved to be an effective accelerant for the AfD's growth. Above all the Left Party, which under cover of left-wing phrases supports the right-wing policies of the other parties, has driven frustrated voters into the arms of right-wing demagogues.

Twelve years on, *Die Anstalt* has thoroughly degenerated. Despite escalating wars, the largest rearmament drive since the Third Reich, mass redundancies in industry and an unprecedented chasm between rich and poor, its creators can think of nothing better than placing their faith in a strong state.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site