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No to Steinmeier's demands for "sacrifices" for Ukraine war!

For days, German politicians and the media have sought to inure the public to making "sacrifices" for the war in Ukraine. Leading the way, as often happens in such cases, has been the social democratic federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

At a concert "For Peace and Freedom" at his Schloss Bellevue official residence last Sunday, Steinmeier declared, "It is not only our humanitarian solidarity that is called for." The harsh sanctions being imposed on Russia would inevitably bring losses "for us too." "We will have to be prepared to bear them if our solidarity is not just to be lip service, if it is to be taken seriously."

"The whole truth is—many hardships still lie ahead," the federal president continued. "Our solidarity and our support, our steadfastness, even our willingness to impose restrictions will be required for a long time to come."



Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Photo: DBT/photothek)

Newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, too, is preparing its readership for austerity. Under the headline, “How to do without again?” the latest issue says: “Words that have not played a role in German reality for a very long time are returning: doing without, deprivation, sacrifice, shortages. Is the government managing to prepare society for this? Is it even trying?”

To strengthen its readers’ willingness to make sacrifices, the news magazine enlists the help of politicians, economists, writers and philosophers.

Author Navid Kermani, according to *Spiegel* “one of the country’s most important intellectuals,” demands an immediate import ban on Russian energy and accuses the German government of flinching at the point “when real restrictions are to be feared.”

Philipp Lepenies, professor of politics with a focus on sustainability at the Berlin Free University, complains that we live “in a culture of consumption, not in a culture of doing without.” Philipp Hübl, philosopher and visiting professor at the Berlin University of the Arts, agrees that the moment for doing without might even be favourable. If there were good and immediately understandable reasons, many would be prepared to accept restrictions. “And few things are as obvious as fighting a dictator who drops bombs on a maternity hospital,” *Spiegel* adds.

But for what are the sacrifices to be made?

To “support the brave and fierce struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom, democracy and self-determination,” Steinmeier answers. To defend “our battle readiness and our fellow humanity, our will for peace and our belief in freedom and democracy.” He uses the term “freedom” no less than eight times in his short speech.

If Steinmeier had been honest, he would have said: To finance the biggest rearmaments offensive since the Second World War; to make Germany the leading military power in Europe again; to bring Ukraine, which we have already conquered, devastated and then lost again in the First and Second World Wars, finally under our influence; to bring about regime change in Russia, which has always stood in the way of our expansionist ambitions; to break it up and gain unhindered access to its vast reserves of raw materials.

Had he been honest, he would have added: To achieve these goals, we accept the greatest possible “sacrifice”—the risk of a third world war that turns the whole of Europe into a nuclear desert.

The Russian attack on Ukraine is reactionary and must be rejected. The images of dead civilians, destroyed homes and fleeing women and children have horrified and outraged many people. But the claim that the war was solely the result of the evil will of a fiend named Putin, who invaded a democratic, freedom-loving and prosperous bucolic Ukraine for no reason at all, is simply absurd.

In reality, it is a proxy war between NATO and Russia, in which the Ukrainian population serves as pawns. It has been prepared and provoked by the US and its European allies over the long term. They have pushed NATO, the most powerful military alliance in the world, further and further east, contrary to existing agreements, twice organised a change of power in Ukraine, armed it to the teeth and promoted fascist forces. Now they are supporting the war with billions worth of arms deliveries.

Steinmeier himself played an important role in this. He was in Kiev as German foreign minister when far-right militias drove out the elected president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. Together with his French and Polish counterparts, he agreed on a change of power, which was then accelerated by the right-wing coup. Steinmeier’s negotiating partners and members of the new government included the Svoboda party, which honours Nazi collaborators and works with the neo-Nazis of the German National Party (NPD).

In addition to Ukrainian musicians, Steinmeier, who knows that his cooperation with right-wing Ukrainian nationalists is met with suspicion, had also invited Russian, Belarusian and Polish musicians to the solidarity concert at Bellevue Palace. The Russian star pianist Yevgeny Kissin, who has been living abroad for 30 years, performed as a soloist. In addition to works by the 84-year-old Ukrainian composer Valentin Sylvestrov, who fled the war and was present in person, works by Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich were also performed.

“Let us not allow Putin’s hatred to turn into hatred between peoples and between people,” Steinmeier reasoned. But Ukrainian Ambassador Andriy Melnyk, an admirer of the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, threw a spoke in the works. He sabotaged the event and

posted a foul nationalist tweet, “My dear God, why is it so hard for the German president to realise that as long as Russian bombs are falling on cities and thousands of civilians are being murdered day and night, we Ukrainians are not up for ‘great Russian culture.’ Basta.”

NATO’s proxy war against Russia, like all imperialist wars, involves fierce attacks on the social gains and democratic rights of the working class. During the First World War, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions agreed on an industrial truce and suppressed all labour struggles. Opponents of the war such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were put behind bars. Before the Second World War, Hitler crushed the workers’ movement and established a regime of terror that punished even harmless anti-war jokes with death.

The same purpose is served by the “sacrifices” now being demanded by the establishment politicians and the media. Working people are to pay the costs for the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler and for a war that threatens their own existence. Wage cuts, social spending cuts and mass sackings, prepared long ago, are now being implemented with the mendacious justification that they are a necessary “sacrifice” for the “freedom” of Ukraine.

The attacks have long since begun. On Wednesday, the Federal Statistical Office reported an inflation rate of 7.3 percent, the highest in 40 years. For millions of working families, this means a dramatic decline in real income. The drop is threatening the existence of those who must pay out a high proportion of their income for petrol, heating or rent, whose prices are really exploding.

Inflation had already risen sharply before the Ukraine war. This is a result of the money glut with which the federal government and the European Central Bank drove stock market prices and the fortunes of the rich to dizzying heights; while workers’ incomes fell, and 20 million lives were sacrificed worldwide because of the “profits before lives” policy in the pandemic.

Pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions and economic dislocations meant that this speculative bubble led to the rise of inflation. The sanctions against Russia accelerated this. In particular, oil and gas prices have risen sharply. And this is only the beginning.

If Russia were to cut off gas supplies to Europe in response to the sanctions, economists expect inflation to reach 10 percent. “Some companies would probably have to halt production and put more people on short-time working,” said the president of the Institute for Economic Research (DIW), Marcel Fratzscher.

According to a DIW study, a permanent supply freeze would lead to an economic slump of 3 percent, which could last around 10 years. Other assessments go even further. In such a case, Chancellor Olaf Scholz expects mass unemployment and a severe recession. Entire branches of industry in Germany would then be threatened, he said on Sunday on the ARD television channel.

According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Russia could turn off the gas tap as early as next weekend. The country has said it will accept gas payments only in roubles from April 1, which G7 economics ministers unanimously rejected on Monday. By switching from euros and dollars to roubles, Russia is trying to stabilise its currency, whose value has plummeted after Western sanctions froze a large part of Russia’s currency reserves.

Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Green Party) announced the early warning stage of the gas emergency plan on Wednesday. A crisis team is now monitoring the supply situation daily. If it deteriorates drastically, the Federal Network Agency decides who will be supplied with gas as a priority. Since many companies in the chemical industry use gas not only as a source of energy, but also as a raw material, there could be total production fallouts.

Natural gas also accounts for 15 percent of Germany’s electricity needs. As much as 41 percent of the energy consumption of private households is covered by gas. If this supply fails, there will be neither heating, nor hot water, nor cooking facilities for many families.

The German government’s Council of Economic Experts has already reduced its growth forecast for this year to 1.8 percent. In November, it still had assumed it would hit 4.6 percent. The so-called “economic experts” estimate inflation continuing at 6.1 percent, which would lead to tax shortfalls. Because of rising defence expenditure, these would have to be recovered through cuts in social spending.

The trade unions have signalled that they are 100 percent on the side of the government and the corporations in the war. Two days after Chancellor Scholz announced a €100 billion increase in the military budget, IG Metall and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) released a joint statement in which they “emphatically” backed the sanctions measures against Russia. IG Metall also left no doubt that it would pass the devastating economic consequences of the sanctions policy—skyrocketing fuel and energy prices, high inflation, layoffs, short-time work and wage losses—onto its members and work to stifle any resistance to them.

Workers cannot and must not accept this. The “sacrifices” demanded of them are not for “peace” but for the escalation of militarism and war. The only way to prevent a renewed slide of humanity into war and barbarism is to build a powerful international anti-war movement in the working class.

The struggle against war and the defence of incomes, social gains and democratic rights are inseparable. In World War I, it was food protests and mass strikes by workers that eventually led to the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the German Revolution in 1918, which ended the war and sent the warmongers packing.

To oppose the danger of war, it is necessary to break with the reactionary trade unions and build independent rank-and-file committees that organise the struggle in the factories and network internationally. Above all, it is necessary to build an international workers’ party that opposes the warmongers in every country, rejects every form of nationalism and fights for a socialist programme to overthrow capitalism. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party).

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