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Germany: Racism in Saxony and political hypocrisy

By Ulrich Rippert

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News reports from the start of the week were difficult to bear. The reports of racist attacks on a bus of incoming refugees in the Saxon community of Clausnitz, Germany, were repugnant. But even worse were the cynicism and hypocrisy of politicians and commentators.

Government press secretary Steffen Seibert declared Monday morning that the German government condemned the xenophobic protests at refugee shelters in no uncertain terms. What had taken place in Clausnitz was “deeply shameful”, he said. Adopting an angry pose, Merkel’s spokesperson said: “How cold-hearted, how cowardly must one be to stand before a bus full of refugees and curse and shout to scare the people on board, many of them women and children?”

Such feigned outrage is revolting. The racist attacks in Clausnitz and several other cities and communities in Germany are the direct result of the xenophobic policies of the federal government.

One could ask Seibert in return: “How brutal, cold-hearted and dishonest is a government that claims to be in solidarity with people in need and to treat them ‘with decency and compassion’, but at the same time restricts the basic right to asylum, eliminates family reunification, seals off the external borders of the European Union and deploys the naval forces of NATO in the Aegean Sea to repel refugee boats?”

What happened in Clausnitz?

On Thursday evening, an angry group of right-wing demonstrators attempted to prevent the arrival of some 20 refugees at a shelter in the Saxon community. Shouting, “We are the people!” the right-wing mob blocked the bus. SpiegelOnline reported on an amateur video taken at the scene. Among the phrases shouted on the recording were: “Just look at what kind of vermin is getting off here!” “Get rid of this trash!” and “Refugee scum!”

In the bus sat intimidated and frightened refugees who, because of the threatening situation, did not want to get off. The video then shows how police violently forced the refugees to disembark. A picture of a crying boy yanked off the bus in the clutches of police made the rounds online and provoked a wave of outrage.

A report by Central German Broadcasting (MDR) revealed that the director of the refugee shelter in Clausnitz, Thomas Hetze, is a member of the xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and has on several occasions openly and sharply criticised the asylum policies of the federal government. His brother is said to have been an organiser of the racist protest action.

A second incident took place in the town of Bautzen, where a fire broke out in a planned refugee shelter on Sunday night. According to details released by the police, 20 to 30 people gathered during the blaze. A police spokesperson said that some commented on the fire “with derogatory remarks and open delight”. Several people had attempted to prevent fire-fighting operations.

That the actions of the police in Clausnitz were directed not at the right-wing demonstrators and thugs, but against the refugees, led to vehement protests, especially in online forums. As a result, Police Chief Uwe Reißmann called a press conference on Saturday at which he vehemently rejected criticism of the police.

Reißmann stressed that the use of “direct force” on refugees was not only justified, but had been “absolutely necessary”. He blamed refugees for escalating the situation. They had taken videos from inside the bus and provoked the crowd with obscene gestures. It was this that caused the situation to get out of hand, he said.

The German Police Union also justified the police operation. The goal had been to bring the refugees to safety in the shelter, said the union.

On Sunday, German interior minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) also defended the police. From 1999 to 2005, De Maizière was himself a member of the Saxon government, ultimately serving as the state’s interior minister. He told the ARD network’s news show “Report from Berlin” that the police “in my view acted appropriately in taking the people off the bus. They were brought to safety in the shelter. I don’t understand criticism of this police operation.”

The events in Clausnitz are a direct result of right-wing, xenophobic policy. For months, the Christian Social Union (CSU), a member of the federal government, has beaten the drum for a more aggressive approach toward refugees. They call for caps on the number of refugees

permitted in the country and a de facto closing of the borders. Saxony's minister-president Stanislaw Tillich (CDU) supports this right-wing course. "Continued uncontrolled entry can no longer be permitted", he said during the CDU's state party congress at the end of last year. Delinquent asylum applicants would have to be deported more quickly.

Chancellor Angela Merkel opposes the closure of borders at a national level, but she also supports a drastic reduction of refugees and expedited deportations. In this, she has the support of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party. Foreigners are almost never spoken of without the word "criminal" being associated with them, and all parties call for speeding up the deportation process for criminal foreigners.

In mid-January, Sahra Wagenknecht, the chairwoman of the Left Party's parliamentary fraction, joined in the agitation against refugees and the call for a stronger state with the words: "Whoever abuses the right to hospitality has forfeited the right to be a guest." Significantly, Wagenknecht was immediately praised by the AfD for her remarks. "Frau Wagenknecht has summed up the situation very well", said Alexander Gauland, deputy chairman of the far-right party.

For the Greens, Boris Palmer, mayor of Tübingen, called for a much stricter course in refugee policy. In an interview with *Spiegel*, he said "the time for Pippi Longstocking or pony farm politics" is over. Palmer declared that effective border controls would have to be re-established and border fences built wherever necessary.

This all-party coalition against refugees is grist for the mill of the far right. It strengthens right-wing parties like the AfD and Pegida, and creates the kind of pogrom climate recently displayed in Clausnitz and Bautzen.