

The European Union's sanctions against Austria

By Peter Schwarz
22 February 2000

For the first time in the history of the European Union (EU), diplomatic sanctions have been imposed on a member state. The 14 other EU countries reacted to the entrance of Joerg Haider's extreme right-wing Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ—Austrian Freedom Party) into the Austrian government by freezing bilateral relations with the alpine republic. There will be no more contacts or ambassadorial meetings at an inter-governmental level, and Austrian candidates will not be supported when EU international offices are assigned.

Although the sanctions are more symbolic than practical in nature—unaffected is Austrian co-operation in EU committees, through which almost all international relations are now conducted—their announcement has unleashed violent arguments throughout Europe. Both proponents and opponents appeal to democratic values.

Supporters of sanctions declare that Europe is a "community of shared values" (German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer), that must clearly distance itself from the "insulting, anti-foreigner and racist utterances of Joerg Haider" (EU Parliamentary President Nicole Fontaine). The European Union states are concerned with delivering "clear signals, a type of symbolic policy" (EU Foreign Policy Representative Javier Solana).

Opponents warn that the EU ban breaks "the fundamental right of each democracy to decide freely which parties its citizens can vote for and which of these parties should form the government.... A cabal of EU heads of government is determining whether the democratic decisions of the people are valid" (*Die Zeit* publisher Theo Sommer).

Closer examination reveals that the poses struck by those claiming to champion democracy and tolerance on either side are untenable.

The European governments have already disqualified themselves in this regard through their own practice. Persecution and discrimination against foreigners are part of everyday life in the European Union. Haider does not miss an opportunity to point this out. He, an extreme right-winger? But hadn't the German Interior Minister Otto

Schily—a social democrat—also demanded a halt to the further influx of foreigners? And doesn't Tony Blair in Great Britain—likewise a social democrat—call for a zero-tolerance policy for juvenile offenders? Etc., etc.

The excited reaction of the European governments to Haider has quite different causes than his xenophobia and intolerance. They are not offended by his politics, and certainly not by his personality. As the prime minister of the Austrian state of Carinthia, Haider has been working for months in the EU's regional committee in Brussels, without anyone getting worked up about it. What they fear are the social tensions and dislocations which have thrown Haider to the surface, and which he knows how to skilfully utilise.

Haider can perhaps be restrained and even trusted; but can *he* restrain the hopes and expectations he has stirred up?

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* thinks not. The paper writes, "with his crude mixture of xenophobia and neo-liberal demands for slimming down the state and disempowering the establishment controlled by the 'old parties', it was easy for him to rally the frightened, and therefore easily whipped-up petty bourgeoisie. In the long run, however, Haider will have to disappoint the high expectations of his clientele, because this mixture is not a consistent response to the manifold and complex challenges of globalisation."

In Austria, the European governments see a mirror of their own future. Social tensions are rising, while their own influence rapidly decreases. The traditional conservative parties are in free fall throughout Europe: the Italian Christian Democrats have disappeared from the scene; the British Tories have been pushed to the margins; the French Gaullists have been ripped to shreds, and now it is the turn of the German Christian Democratic Union!

The Social Democrats know that they are next. For years they have ruthlessly driven forward European unification in such a way as to benefit the most powerful branches of big business, over the heads of their traditional voters, who perceive the process only in the form of unemployment, austerity measures, welfare cuts and increasing insecurity. They face mistrust and rejection from below.

Who will fill the vacuum that is emerging? In Austria it was Haider. In the absence of a progressive—i.e., genuinely socialist—alternative, he could direct the fears and indignation of sections of the population into nationalist and anti-foreign channels.

But it is not only Austria that has Joerg Haiders. In Belgium, the extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok has recorded some success. In France, former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, from the right flank of the Gaullists, has created a new party that is thought capable of even greater successes than the Front National of Jean Marie Le Pen. It is no coincidence that the governments of these two countries have reacted most violently to the developments in Austria.

In Denmark, the xenophobic People's Party under Pia Kjaersgard has registered spectacular success. In Norway, the right-wing Progress Party is the second strongest in parliament. In Italy, the party press of Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord (Northern League) led with the headline: "Haider and Lega Nord, the elective affinities". And in Germany, the Bavarian Christian Social Union has demonstratively solidarised itself with the new Austrian government.

"Behind the fear of Haider lurks the fear of their own voters, of a fraying on the right," comments *Die Zeit*. Political instability and danger for the further expansion of the European Union are threatened. Decisions of general principle are pending this year regarding the planned expansion into Eastern Europe, which could now fail because of Austrian opposition.

These are the real reasons for the sanctions against Austria. The European governments are fighting against a Frankenstein monster that they have created and which they continue to nourish. This is why the sanctions have been so half-hearted and are becoming a farce.

In the meantime, the issue has been reduced to the question of whether one should shake hands with Austrian representatives at regular EU meetings and appear with them in group photos. One newspaper mockingly commented on the occasion of the recent foreign minister's meeting in Brussels of a "diplomatic ballet around Haider's shadow".

If the sanctions have achieved anything, they have made Haider stronger. The actions of the European governments could only reinforce the impression that the authorities in Brussels and the European great powers arrogantly trample upon the interests of a small country.

"At worst, the decision of the 14 European Union states could confirm old anti-European prejudices about the undemocratic nature of the community. And so—at the extreme—foster the solidarity of those deprived of their rights, the banding together of the overburdened and misunderstood," writes the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

However, to draw from this the conclusion that Haider's

ascent expresses the "democratic decision of the people", as Theo Sommer writes in the article quoted above from *Die Zeit*, is absurd. This argument is only a foretaste of the coming reconciliation of the European establishment with Haider, which is inevitable. In reality, Haider's success is the result of the absence of democracy, if this is understood not simply in a formal sense, but from the standpoint real political conditions: i.e., the ability of broad social layers to influence political events.

In the 1960s and 70s, the traditional parties still reacted to a certain degree to the will of the voters and pressure from below. Their economic and social policies had to take the needs of broader social layers into account. Today this no longer the case.

All parties adapt their politics to the requirements of the stock market. No matter how an election turns out, the policy remains the same. The parties no longer argue about different programmes, but only about who can put the same big business program into practice more effectively.

Haider understood how to turn the disappointments and fears that this produced to his own benefit—not as a democrat, who genuinely responds to the social needs of his voters, but as a right-wing demagogue, who channels their fears against the weakest and most oppressed in society, against foreigners and refugees.

Meanwhile, the governmental programme of the new People's Party/Freedom Party coalition reads like a blueprint for the programmes of the German, Italian and British governments. At its heart lies the reorganisation of the budget. To this end, jobs are to be cut, provisions for welfare, sickness and unemployment benefits and pensions are to be "reformed", state-owned industries privatised and forced labour introduced for people on social security.

Without doubt, Haider represents a real danger to democratic rights and the past social achievements of the working class. But this danger cannot be fought by solidarising with the hypocritical professions of democracy from the European governments. The only effective response to Haider, and the danger from the right which he embodies, is the building of a political movement that defends the social needs of working people against the interests of big business—that is, the building of an international socialist party.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>