

German President Koehler says inequality must be the new norm

By Ulrich Rippert
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Just a few weeks before official ceremonies marking the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in the autumn of 1989, German President Horst Koehler has unleashed a controversy. Koehler told *Focus* magazine that people face “big differences in conditions throughout Germany.” He rejected any attempt to overcome this inequality, arguing that those who want to level the differences would create “the subsidy state,” storing up an “intolerable burden of debt” for the younger generation.

Several politicians from the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD) said Koehler had used an “unfortunate formulation.” The deputy chairman of the SPD parliamentary group, Ludwig Stiegler, told the *Berliner Zeitung* that if the goal of equalizing living conditions in the east and west of the country were abandoned, East Germans would regard this as a “call for resignation.”

Drawing attention to imminent state elections in Saxony and Brandenburg, the Green Party’s economic spokesman, Fritz Kuehn, accused Koehler of “unintentionally aiding the election campaign of the Party of Democratic Socialism” (PDS), which, Kuehn said, is nourished by the “feeling of many East Germans that they are second-class citizens.” He complained that Koehler’s statement that there will never be “equality between east and west” simply reinforces such feelings.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* led with the headline, “The Right Theme at the Wrong Time.” But unlike previous occasions, Koehler did not retreat. The Office of the President rejected all suggestions that Koehler had simply uttered an awkward or thoughtless comment, and declared that the president had expressed himself very precisely.

It did not take long for a grand coalition of politicians and business figures to form in support of Koehler’s statement, similar to that which arose on the issue of the “Hartz IV” labour market reforms. Chancellor Gerhard

Schroeder (SPD) expressly defended the president—which did not prevent him from simultaneously affirming that all relevant bodies would nevertheless uphold the constitutionally enshrined “establishment of equal living conditions in east and west” Germany.

Ex-president Richard von Weizsaecker (Christian Democratic Union), Economics Minister Wolfgang Clement (SPD), and representatives of the employers’ associations rushed to the aid of President Koehler. In *Der Spiegel*, Christian Malzahn gushed jubilantly, “Bravo Mr. President!” He reproached all critics saying, “The scandal is that the truths spoken by Koehler were not expressed 15 years ago.”

Koehler’s statement is important because—as the highest representative of the state—he has officially announced the end of the policy of social compromise. To a great extent, German economic and social policy throughout the entire post-war period was aimed at reconciling social differences. The policy of intra-state financial transfers was a component of this policy, aimed at avoiding the build-up of glaring social contradictions between different parts of the country.

Following a world war and fascist dictatorship, the overcoming of social divisions was even written into the constitution. Article 20 defines Germany as not only a democratic, but expressly as a “social state.” In schools and universities, the “constitutional norm of welfare statehood” and the “principle of the welfare state” were expounded upon in detail. Accordingly, one of the central tasks of the state was said to be the elimination of social injustice, adversity and hardship by means of the appropriate social policies.

This view meant that the state was obliged to promote the well-being of all citizens with the aim of encouraging equality. The reconciliation of the socially weak with the strong was not limited to groups of individuals, but also extended to the relations between individual states and

regions.

In no other country was there so much talk of social harmony and social reconciliation. Repeatedly, the “social obligations of private property” were declared the highest constitutional principle, and the collaboration of the various “social partners” was stressed.

Scarcely 15 years ago, German reunification was celebrated as the “triumph of the free-market economy.” It was claimed that capitalism had proved itself the superior social system because it combined increasing social prosperity with liberty and democracy.

A few years later, however, in 1994, the constitution was quietly changed and the formulation in article 72—“equality of living conditions”—was replaced by the substantially weaker “establishment of equivalent living conditions.” Since then, the social crisis has intensified sharply. Nevertheless, official propaganda still laid claim to the goal of upholding the welfare state.

The German president’s demand that inequality be recognized as the norm is tantamount to a confession that the previous policy of social reconciliation has failed. A glance at the former East Germany some 15 years after reunification makes clear that the social contradictions between east and west have not lessened, but grown.

Taking last year’s statistics, the following picture emerges:

* Unemployment—west Germany 9.4 percent; east Germany 20 percent;

* Average hourly wages for blue collar workers—west Germany 15.56 euros; east Germany 10.89 euros;

* Average monthly income of white collar workers—west Germany 3,824 euros; east Germany 2,853 euros;

* Gross domestic product per capita—west Germany 27,671 euros; east Germany 18,580 euros.

But the real picture is not simply one of contradictions between east and west, as some trade union leaders and PDS officials claim. Koehler’s call to regard inequality as the norm goes much further. It must be seen in connection with the drastic social cuts being carried out by the SPD-Green Party coalition government in Berlin—in the form of the so-called “Hartz IV” laws—and systematic attacks on workers at all large-scale enterprises. One company after another is confronting the workforce with the alternative: either accept wage cuts and worsened conditions, or production will be shifted to low-wage countries in Eastern Europe or Asia.

In view of the mass demonstrations of recent weeks, where the demand for social justice was central, Koehler

is calling for the political and business elite not to give way, but rather to declare an end once and for all to the fiction of a “social” free-market economy and a policy of social reconciliation.

The timing of his interview—just days before elections in two important east German states, Saxony and Brandenburg—was deliberate, and not the result of “political inexperience,” as some commentators claimed. Koehler wants to make it clear that official politics will no longer be driven by elections, and certainly will not respond to pressure from the streets, but instead will pursue its goals independently of tactical electoral considerations.

With his interview, Koehler is reacting to the worsening international economic crisis and global competition, which exert ever-greater pressure on the German economy. In order to maintain its position on the world market, German capitalism has initiated a brutal offensive in every workplace to slash wages and roll back conditions.

The claim that high productivity and the development of new markets would enable Germany to preserve social conditions that have long been destroyed, or never existed, in most other countries, has proven false. Since the European Union expanded into the East, welfare cuts have been continually accelerated.

The Koehler interview is significant for the working class. Working people must also bid farewell to the illusion of “social partnership” and the “social free-market economy.” Koehler’s words clearly show that any notion that the ruling elite can be compelled to seriously alter its policies through pressure and appeals to “reason” is an illusion.

To answer the offensive of big business and the government, the working class needs a new political perspective and a new party, one that proceeds from the irreconcilability of class interests and embodies a revolutionary socialist programme.

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