

Germany: Tens of thousands protest against ultra-right Pegida movement

By Christoph Dreier
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Thousands of supporters of the right-wing extremist Pegida movement gathered once again at a demonstration in Dresden on Monday. According to the police, there were 17,500 participants, 2,500 more than the previous week. While tens of thousands more demonstrated in several cities against anti-immigrant chauvinism and racism, leading politicians announced they would enter dialogue with the right-wing radicals.

The Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Western World (Pegida) called for a gathering in front of the Semper Opera in Dresden to sing Christmas carols. As in previous weeks, large numbers of right-wing extremists from across the country attended, carrying countless German flags from almost every German state.

Anti-immigrant and racist slogans could be seen on banners and placards. According to the police, the aggressive atmosphere at Pegida's tenth demonstration culminated in an attack on an opposing protester who was taken to hospital with injuries.

In other cities where groups supporting the right-wing extremist movement have been formed, only several hundred gathered to protest. In Bonn, the demonstration was organised by a former official of the fascist National Democratic Youth (JN), Melanie Dittmar, among others. In Leipzig, supporters of the right-wing conservative Alternative for Germany (AfD), are planning demonstrations for January.

Tens of thousands took to the streets across Germany to protest against the Pegida demonstrations. In Munich alone, the organisers estimated that 25,000 people gathered in front of the state opera to protest against anti-immigrant chauvinism. Dresden saw a protest of more than 5,000. Further demonstrations occurred in Kassel, Bonn and Würzburg.

While the counter-demonstrators expressed their genuine concerns about the march by the right-wing extremists, the organisers sought to avoid the central

political issues and lead the protests into a blind alley. Churches, party representatives and organisations stated that the struggle against the right was purely a moral question, and portrayed the sudden emergence of Pegida as a spontaneous development.

In fact, the mobilisation of the right-wing dregs of society is connected with a deliberate campaign in the media and by politicians of all the main bourgeois parties. From the outset, the protests received overblown media coverage and were supported by government representatives such as interior minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union, CDU). Over the last week, representatives of all parties in parliament and numerous commentators expressed their understanding for the actions of the fascist mob and offered dialogue.

It is no accident that the demonstrations have been engineered in the capital of Saxony. The integration of the state government with the right-wing extremist scene is more advanced in Saxony than in any other German state.

Exemplary of this development is Steffen Flath, a former chairman of the CDU faction in the Saxony state parliament. Flath was a member of the CDU in East Germany prior to German reunification and is a speaker on behalf of the Christian fundamentalist organisation "March for Life," which vehemently opposes abortion. Flath also has close ties to the arch-conservative splinter group "Action to stop the left trend ... which opposes what it calls the "creeping Islamisation" of Germany.

Its section in Saxony was well known for its links to the right-wing extremist and anti-Islamic website Politically Incorrect, which now calls for the Pegida demonstrations.

Former justice minister in Saxony, Steffen Heitmann (CDU), declared as far back as the mid-1990s his "great concern for this, our western society." In keeping with the Pegida demands, he stated, "Hordes of foreigners are endangering the right of Germans to realise their identity in some areas."

The right-wing terrorist group National Socialist Underground (NSU) was able to go underground for years in the Saxon town of Zwickau, relying on an extensive support network. There is considerable evidence that this network was largely composed of intelligence agents and police employees.

Acts of criminal violence by right-wing extremists in Saxony are regularly written off as non-political clashes. When right-wing radicals pursued a group of South Asians in the small town of Mügeln with the cry “foreigners out!” and attacked them, then Interior Minister Albrecht Buttolo called it a “scuffle which escalated.” Even though “right-wing extremist slogans” had been used, this did not mean that the crime had right-wing extremist motives.

But the judiciary in Saxony takes ruthless action against those who oppose right-wing extremism. When thousands of people demonstrated against a Nazi march on February 13, 2012, the police took brutal action against the participants. The state prosecutor then lodged charges against the anti-Nazi demonstrators.

Together with large sections of the CDU, the AfD also supports the demonstrations. The state chairman of the AfD in Saxony, Frauke Petry, announced a meeting with the Pegida leaders in January. “Others are speaking about Pegida, we will speak with them,” said Petry. “It will be an initial meeting to understand what these people want, and to exchange views without any obligations.”

Alexander Gauland, AfD fraction leader in the Brandenburg state parliament, was the first high-ranking politician to attend the Pegida demonstrations in Dresden last week. The former CDU politician described Pegida’s main demands as “things that one could sign up to.”

Gauland’s attendance at the protest, accompanied by a cabal of journalists, makes clear what the Pegida movement is about. The most backward layers are to be mobilised to impose Germany’s new aggressive foreign policy and attacks on social conditions against opposition from workers.

Gauland is in favour of this more than any other politician. Two years ago, in an article in the Berlin-based *Tagespiegel*, he proclaimed the Germans had a “troubled relationship with military force” and a “lack of appreciation for the German army.” The “pacifist obsession” had to be finally abandoned, he argued, in favour of participation in military interventions against Libya and Syria. In line with Bismarck, he declared that the decisive issues of the day would be resolved with “blood and iron.”

This programme is now to be implemented with Pegida’s assistance. In this, Gauland serves as a conduit between the openly right-wing extremists and the CDU. He is well connected in the ultra-conservative circles of Saxony’s CDU under Alfred Dregger, and maintains close ties to his former party colleagues.

The current state president in Hesse, Volker Bouffier, was state secretary along with Gauland at the end of the 1980s in the Hesse state government under Walter Wallmann (CDU). Today, he states that the Pegida demonstrators can’t “be labelled extremists.” Instead, they must be “taken seriously” and spoken to.

Yet the downplaying and embrace of Pegida is not confined to the right wing of the CDU. In the same way that all of the parties have been involved in the revival of German militarism, they are opening up to the right-wing mob in order to force through these policies.

The mayor of the Berlin district of Neuköln, Heinz Bushkovsky, defended Pegida and attacked the counter-demonstrators instead. It was entirely normal that people have fears about foreigners, and official politics had to take up these fears and concerns, the Social Democratic politician said.

The first Left Party state president, Bodo Ramelow, also spoke out in favour of dialogue with Pegida demonstrators who were motivated by the fear that immigrants would take jobs away from them. It had to be explained that such fears were unfounded, Ramelow said.

The support for Pegida from the media and politicians is directly bound up with the revival of an aggressive German foreign policy and militarism. As was the case in the 1930s, once again the preparations for war are being accompanied by the deliberate propagation of nationalism and racism and the building up of far-right organizations.

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