

# Berlin's "red-red-green" state government sets up refugee ghettos made from shipping containers

By Franci Vier  
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On December 13, the red-red-green (SPD-Left Party-Green Party) state administration in Berlin decided to swiftly move refugees from mass lodgings into so-called "temp-homes." The refugees are to be housed in container settlements that were ordered by the previous Social Democrat-Christian Democrat administration, and which are partly completed.

More than 20,000 refugees are still living in inhuman conditions in airport hangars, gymnasiums and trade fair halls in Berlin. Residents at one such camp recently went on a hunger strike to draw attention to the intolerable conditions.

The Left Party, whose state ministers are responsible for Housing and Construction and for Labour, Integration and Social Affairs in the new government, now praise the temporary container settlements as the solution to the housing crisis facing refugees. Last Tuesday's decision by the Berlin state administration was a "signal for a real change in policy," said Katina Schubert, the refugee policy spokeswoman for the Left Party.

The special building programme adopted in autumn 2015 planned originally for thirty container villages, but the figure was since reduced to eighteen. Designed to be habitable for a maximum of three years, they have mostly been built on the outskirts of Berlin, far away from the inner city districts with their infrastructure, subway system and educational institutions.

They are usually situated next to or in industrial areas, as well as close to major roads and not infrequently by train tracks. At the end of 2014, a special derogation in planning law was introduced allowing accommodation for refugees to be built in places that are not suitable for residential purposes.

As with the current mass accommodation, external operators will be contracted to organize and manage the container villages. They will receive a guaranteed daily rate per refugee for three years, providing them with lucrative business. As a result, it is not surprising that there was a veritable scramble when the European-wide tender was opened for each location. The approximately 30 to 50 companies who applied to operate a container village noticed they offered "quite some economic potential," the spokesman for the Berlin State Office for Refugees (LAF) Sascha Langenberg was quoted recently in the online edition of *Die Welt*.

According to the state administration, around 280 to 500 people will be housed in each facility, with up to 1,000 at a double-sized location. The units consist of three containers, each of approximately 13 square metres, making a total of just 39 square metres. This is meant to house four to eight people—depending on whether the state administration defines them as "emergency shelter" with high permitted occupancy rates or "community accommodation" with a lower occupancy level.

The interior of the accommodation is Spartan, to say the least. The windows are located on the narrow sides. With a container length of about six metres, the rear portion of the space is difficult to ventilate and receives little daylight.

The shelters are situated in remote wastelands—without any landscaping or trees. Each site will be fenced off, with an entrance gate with entry control and security personnel. Supply buildings, children's playrooms, computer rooms and the like are also situated within this perimeter fence.

In this way, the temp-home settlements take on the character of a ghetto. Cut off from the neighbourhood, the containers—seen all over the world on building sites or cargo depots—repurposed for “residential” use, clearly send out the message: Whoever lives here is a refugee, only temporarily tolerated in Germany; these are people of second or third class.

The plans to house refugees in subhuman conditions are not seen as merely a short-term, temporary solution. This reality is reflected in the so-called “modular accommodation for refugees (MUF),” facilities to be built in the coming year and which the new red-red-green state administration wants to construct.

Unlike the containers, the MUF facilities are designed to be habitable for up to one hundred years. Using a precast concrete construction, similar to previous prefabricated buildings, large, five-story homes are to be constructed to house refugees.

But these shelters will face even greater problems with lighting and ventilation. Apart from the communal sanitary facilities, many kitchens and living areas remain without daylight. People would continue to live in narrow confinement and have little privacy. Two people are to occupy a 16-square-metre room, while 15 people share two showers.

The architecture magazine *Bauwelt* describes these buildings as being part of a fundamental shift from “housing to shelter.” The “modular shelters” are only “convertible into individual apartments at extraordinary expense,” it says.

This demonstrates the long-term strategy of the Berlin state administration, which is only planning for a minority of refugees to be provided with homes and integration. The percentage of asylum seekers who manage to get a private apartment stood at 58 percent in 2013.

At the same time, the minimum social standards that shaped housing in the post-war period, and which emulated the programme of social housing in the 1920s under the slogan “light, air, sun,” are being undermined. The first to suffer are refugee families, but ultimately this will also apply to other working-class residents who can no longer afford Berlin’s soaring rents, and who will be forced into ever more miserable living quarters.

By opting for temp-homes and the continued construction of the MUFs, the red-red-green state

administration has made clear that it will continue the right-wing refugee policy of its Social Democrat-Christian Democrat predecessor. Just one week after taking office, it has abandoned its promise to provide refugees with decentralized accommodation in individual apartments. While the coalition agreement said that a red-red-green administration would “accommodate refugees quickly in homes,” there is no longer any talk of this.

Under the new government, the Left Party’s Katrin Lompscher will serve as state minister for construction. She served as state health minister in the earlier SPD-Left Party administration of Klaus Wowereit, which was responsible for the mass privatization of social housing that contributed to the present housing shortage.

Now the self-created housing shortage is being used as justification to force refugee families into container villages and push them into ghetto-like settlements in the long term.

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