

New information reveals extent of attack on democratic rights during G20 protest in Hamburg

By Sven Heymann
17 July 2017

Last week, the G20 summit in Hamburg saw massive attacks on fundamental democratic rights. The police placed the city under a virtual state of siege, which was accompanied by drastic infringements on freedom of opinion, assembly and the press, to a degree that is unprecedented in Germany in recent decades.

Days before the start of the summit, the police effectively abolished the freedom of assembly throughout a 38-square-kilometer security zone with a so-called general order. Within this zone, which was to be kept clear for the arrival and departure of the visiting dignitaries, demonstrations were not permitted, and roads could be closed at any time. A smaller area around the location where the summit took place was completely sealed off and could only be entered by residents.

The police clearly started the first major clash, when they ignored a court decision and cleared the “Anti-capitalist Camp” on the Elbe meadows in the Entenwerder District. After numerous efforts by the city authorities to refuse permission for the camp, the organizers went to the Supreme Court, which upheld their right to set up the tent camp. The court decision also explicitly included permission to set up 150 tents for overnight accommodation.

But the operation by the Hamburg police ignored the Supreme Court judgment, which had approved the camp on the basis of the right to freedom of assembly (Article 8 in the German Constitution). After the first camp participants had erected just eleven tents, the police stormed the meadow, attacking participants with pepper spray and batons, and clearing the area. It was retrospectively confirmed by the Hamburg Higher Administrative Court that this action was illegal, but the camp organizers refused to expose themselves to the danger of further police attacks and cancelled the camp.

The behaviour of the police, who had assembled 20,000 officers from all sixteen federal states, as well as special units from neighbouring states, was aimed at escalating the

situation. This was also demonstrated in the following days, when several peaceful demonstrations and assemblies were stormed and dispersed. While the police complained in the media that 476 officers had been injured during the summit, no official figures on the number of protesters injured by police were provided. The Republican Lawyers Association (RAV) assumes that it must have been several hundred people.

The police acted quite differently at first during the night riot in the Schanzenviertel District. They did not intervene for hours, as rioters and, according to news reports, youth from the city quarter, built barricades, occupied buildings and stormed and plundered businesses. The police leadership justified this restraint by arguing that it did not want to expose its own forces to too great a risk. But new details are becoming known each day putting the behavior of the police in a different light.

It is now known that police officers in civilian clothes were also active at the scene, one of them even giving a warning shot. He had assumed that another civilian, who had just been physically attacked by some anarchists, was also a plainclothes police officer. This incident alone suggests that the police were operating with numerous undercover officers and possibly provocateurs in order to provide an excuse for a later, all the harsher, intervention.

An interview in *Spiegel Online* and *n-tv.de* reinforces the conclusion that the police and security forces used the situation as a kind of training for civil war and uprisings. In this interview, Sven Mewes, commander of the Saxony State Special Operations Command (SEK), explains the action of his 40-strong unit on the night from the 7th to the 8th of July in Schanzenviertel. According to Mewes, they had been deployed to Hamburg together with other special units ostensibly to fight terrorism. But then, “because of the considerable threat situation” in the Schanzenviertel, the unit, together with the notorious Cobra special unit from Vienna, was used to storm occupied houses.

Mewes' remarks suggest how far the police are being prepared for use in civil war-like conditions. It was necessary, he said, to assume that "criminals armed with firearms were also to be found. Accordingly, our approach was extremely robust in terms of our own safety, but also prepared for a highly dynamic operation. That is, we had been approved for firearm use, we used diversionary pyrotechnics in the buildings and opened doors using firearms with special ammunition. All those we encountered, we immediately laid on the ground, tied up and then had them taken away. (...) There was no resistance at all."

Mewes also said his unit carried out some 13 arrests, especially on house roofs. Remarkably, he said, the situation in the Schanzenviertel "quieted down considerably following our intervention." There was no stone-throwing and no rioters, he added. This observation is even more revealing because it shows that the claim by the police that the Schanzenviertel could not be brought under control for hours is obviously false, and has been used to provide a justification for the brutal use of special forces.

The official presentation that the rioters were mostly members of the "Black Block" is also highly questionable. As the *Hamburger Morgenpost* reported, right-wing extremists could also be found among the rioters. The anti-Muslim group HoGeSa (Hooligans against Salafisten) had announced on Facebook that it would leave Hannover on Saturday and go to Hamburg and participate in the riots.

There is also evidence of the involvement of members of the far-right German National Party (NPD). For example, the NPD Hamburg had announced on its web site that it would "recognizably participate in suitable demonstrations." Whether and how many police *agents provocateurs* participated in the violent clashes is so far unclear. However, this should be assumed, considering the long history of police provocateurs inside the Hamburg anarchist scene.

Whoever was taken into custody by the police in Hamburg, for whatever reason, was practically without legal rights. The Republican Lawyers Association reported that people who were detained at the Hamburg-Harburg Detention Center (GESA) were not told the grounds for this deprivation of liberty. Often, detainees were not informed of the reasons why they had been arrested until they were heard before a magistrate, if such a hearing even occurred.

Those detained were also denied the right to call the lawyers' emergency service, provided they happened to know the telephone number. Instead, the police gave detainees a Hamburg telephone directory, from whose thousands of entries they should find a lawyer. As the RAV learned, this procedure had been ordered by the leadership

of the police operations.

In newspapers, young demonstrators reported how they were treated inside the GESA facility. Humiliation by the police included naked body searches, being locked for 30 hours in a windowless container and being taken to the toilets in handcuffs. To prevent prisoners from sleeping, bright neon lights were on all night, and a police officer banged on the door every 20 minutes.

Attorneys who wanted to visit their clients in the GESA facility were denied access, according to the RAV. This legal breach was justified on the absurd grounds that the attorneys could secretly pass their clients dangerous items. In some cases, attorneys were even banned from entering the GESA facility altogether, which made it impossible for them to contact their clients in person.

The police and security authorities also acted with unprecedented aggressiveness against journalists. Nine journalists from different media outlets had their accreditation withdrawn on accessing the press centre of the G20 summit, initially without justification. A total of 32 journalists were affected by a withdrawal of accreditation.

The police did not even shrink from physical violence against journalists. A typical example is the case of Flo Smith, who reported for the *Huffington Post* from the summit. On the afternoon of July 7, the first day of the summit, he was in the harbour area with a camera crew, where fighting between police and anarchists was taking place. When the reporting team wanted to withdraw to a quieter part of the city, it was attacked suddenly by police officers and abused.

"A police officer came up to me and my camera man," reports Smith. "We both looked in their direction, they screamed, 'Fuck the press!' and fired their pepper spray." Smith collapsed after the spray hit him in the face, he said.

Smith had worked in Iraq for three years, he said, had been at the Gezi protests in Istanbul and reported from Athens when the police had shot a youth there, "and the city burned," Smith said. "But all that was a ride in the park in comparison to what is happening in Hamburg: Something is out of control here."

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>