

Following “night of violence” in Stuttgart

German media and politicians stoke massive campaign for a police state

By Jan Ritter and Johannes Stern
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German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, parliamentary deputies from all parties and the country’s media are blustering about a “night of violence in Stuttgart,” “civil war-like conditions” and “severe breaches of the peace,” while seeking to outdo each other with demands for more police and tough punishments for “vandals” and “immigrants ready to commit violence.”

The campaign is aimed at establishing an authoritarian state in which even journalistic and satirical criticisms of the police are prohibited.

The occasion for the propaganda offensive was the events in the city of Stuttgart over the weekend. Clashes between youth and the police broke out on Saturday night following a police search of a 17-year-old for drugs in front of the Stuttgart State Opera. According to police figures, 19 officers were injured, and 12 police cars, an ambulance and 40 businesses were damaged. Reports indicated that those arrested were men between the ages of 16 and 33, and included German, Croatian, Iraqi, Portuguese and Latvian nationals.

Although the official figures are modest and it remains entirely unclear what took place that night, the events are being massively exaggerated and exploited. The high point of the campaign to date was the appearance of Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU) on Monday. Accompanied by the Minister President of Baden-Württemberg Winfried Kretschmann, Stuttgart mayor Fritz Kuhn (both Green Party) and Baden-Württemberg’s Interior Minister Thomas Strobl (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Seehofer walked through Stuttgart city centre followed by a crowd of media representatives.

Against the backdrop of a few broken window panes and a demolished police car, which was specially transported to the scene for the event, the politicians issued fascist law-and-order tirades and demands for revenge. “Such scenes cannot be permitted to repeat themselves in this city. In my opinion, what happened here was a severe breach of the peace, and that is one of the most serious crimes, which this Republic will not tolerate,” threatened Kretschmann. “We’ll do everything we can to catch the perpetrators,” asserted Seehofer.

Such “excesses” cannot be allowed to recur.

Prior to this, Seehofer and Strobl agitated on Bild Live in the manner of the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD). “Multiculti has its definite limits in existing laws,” stated Strobl. Stuttgart’s liberality is at an end “if violence is perpetrated.” It is time for a halt to “the insulting of our police and the discrediting of officers.” To prove that the violence was not triggered by the police, they showed the video of a rioter rushing a police officer at full speed and forcing the latter to the ground.

In reality, the video, which was shown on all television news programmes as an example of violence against the police, shows the officer kneeling on an unconscious youth who is lying on the ground. The pictures recall the violent arrest of George Floyd in the US, which led to the death of the 46-year-old African American man. Other videos showed how the police cracked down violently against the young people.

The entire police operation amounted to a military-style intervention. They systematically exploited the gathering of young people, who regularly come together in Stuttgart’s city centre due to the closure of bars and clubs, to carry out a major police exercise. The cityscape was dominated by hundreds of officers in full combat gear. Around 200 officers were called up from surrounding areas in Baden-Württemberg. Two police helicopters circled over the city centre throughout the night. Stuttgart police chief Frank Lutz called for a “massive forces plan” over the coming days and weekends, and the further strengthening of the police presence.

Stuttgart’s police force is notorious for its brutality towards demonstrators, especially following the operations against protesters opposing the Stuttgart 21 train station in September 2010. On that occasion, the police deployed water cannons, pepper spray and batons against peaceful protesters, injuring 400 people, many of them seriously. The intervention was so brutal and disproportionate that the Stuttgart Administrative Court felt compelled to describe it in 2016 as unlawful.

While the politicians and commentators in the major media outlets view the youth as merely a police problem and as “enemies” (Seehofer), some reports in the local media give a

sense of the social background to the events. Fadi Mongid, who runs a jewellery shop in the Marienstraße, the centre of the damage caused on Saturday, told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, “These children have nothing to lose.”

Kerima Ryle, a passerby, was more explicit in comments to the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, saying, “Perhaps they drank too much. The background to that? Unemployed—at this point. Outraged at everything—due to the coronavirus.”

Like many other major cities, supposedly affluent Stuttgart, known for its auto industry and industry fairs, has become a social powder keg, where young people have no prospects and the gulf between rich and poor has grown uninterrupted. According to studies, the proportion of people at risk of poverty in Stuttgart rose from 13 percent in 2005 to 16.1 percent in 2014. Apart from cities in the Ruhr region, this is the highest increase of poverty of all major cities across the country. The proportion of people in precarious employment has also increased more rapidly in Stuttgart than at the national level over the same time period.

In the course of the coronavirus crisis, which the ruling elite has exploited to transfer hundreds of billions of euros into the bank accounts of the super-rich, major corporations, and banks, these conditions have worsened. A number of reports in the local media note the growth in the use of so-called food-sharing stores and food banks in Stuttgart’s outlying suburbs.

“New people are continuously turning up. The crisis is growing,” a volunteer commented on the situation. Another told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, an increase in requests for food has come from people on short-term work or those who have lost their jobs. The true extent of it “is totally impossible to predict,” the individual added. The major automakers in particular are planning mass job cuts. An additional 10,000 jobs are to be cut at Daimler.

The developments in Stuttgart are replicated across Germany and Europe. Anger is building up under the surface everywhere, creating the conditions for a social and political explosion. To the fear of the ruling elite, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Germany as part of the global protest movement against the murder of George Floyd. The protests not only expressed the widespread hatred of the police in Germany, which is notorious for racism, right-wing extremist networks and violence against left-wing protesters. They also reflected opposition to the rise of the far-right AfD, the right-wing polices of the grand coalition, the return of German militarism, attacks on democratic rights and growing unemployment and social inequality.

For this reason, all the bourgeois parties, from the right-wing extremist AfD to the Left Party and trade unions, are closing ranks, denouncing all young people as “violent,” and declaring their solidarity with the police.

On Twitter, Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch described the behaviour of the Stuttgart youth as

“repugnant” and sent “best wishes for a quick recovery to the injured police officers and operational personnel.” Two weeks ago, he defended the brutal police crackdown against peaceful protesters in the Social Democratic Party (SPD)/Left Party/Green-governed state of Berlin, saying, “The police do not deserve less, but rather more social recognition and personnel, especially on the streets.”

The campaign is enabling the ruling class to target even the most limited criticisms of police violence, racism and right-wing extremism. The deputy leader of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, Torsten Frei, blamed SPD leader Saskia Esken for the Stuttgart violence because she referred to racist tendencies in the German police following George Floyd’s murder. “Now we are paying the price for the anti-police climate of recent weeks,” he wrote on Twitter, and named Esken personally even though she has long distanced herself from her remarks and called for “tough punishment” for the Stuttgart “vandals.”

Seehofer even threatened in his capacity as Interior Ministry to sue *TAZ* columnist Hengameh Yaghoobifarah who criticised the police in a satirical comment. “A loss of inhibition in words inevitably leads to a loss of inhibitions in deeds and to excesses of violence, just like we are seeing now in Stuttgart,” he stated. In other words, anyone who even dares to criticise the German police must be treated like a violent criminal and persecuted by the capitalist state and its apparatus of repression.

This essentially fascist campaign is being coordinated at the highest levels. Germany’s head of state, Steinmeier (SPD), also attacked Yaghoobifarah, and thus all critics of the police. “Whoever attacks police officers, ridicules them or creates the impression that they must be disposed of must be decisively rejected,” he said. The perpetrators of Stuttgart stand for “violence, vandalism, and sheer brutality,” and “must be pursued and punished with the full force of the law.”

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