

The far right's storming of the German parliament

By Christoph Vandreier
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Images of neo-Nazis waving the pre-1918 flag of the German Empire on the steps of Germany's federal parliament building have rapidly spread around the world, producing justifiable outrage. The scenes were part of the mobilisation of some 30,000 right-wing extremists, anti-Semites and their supporters in the German capital, Berlin, on Saturday to protest against any effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Representatives of the government and opposition parties sought to publicly distance themselves from the protests in the media. "German Empire flags and right-wing extremist sloganeering in front of the German parliament are intolerable attacks on the heart of our democracy," declared German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democrats, SPD). "It affects us all when a visibly right-wing extremist minority prepared to commit violence wants to storm the seat of the people's representatives," said Federal Parliament President Wolfgang Stubbé (Christian Democrats, CDU).

Such statements are thoroughly hypocritical. The politicians are concerned not about the right-wing extremists, who waved flags of the Kaiser's Empire and Nazi insignia, but that their actions expose the dangerous political developments in Germany and will provoke popular opposition. All of these parties have been cooperating with the right-wing extremists in parliament. They have elected deputies of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to chair important parliamentary committees, made the AfD the official opposition and implemented its inhumane policies.

In the days preceding Saturday's demonstration, representatives of all the parties and the media had applauded it. With the mobilisation of right-wing extremists, they want to intimidate and suppress the mounting opposition to their reckless policy of reopening the economy amid the coronavirus pandemic.

After the Berlin authorities banned the demonstration on the grounds that numerous statements were made declaring the intention of participants to ignore regulations concerning

social distancing and the wearing of masks, the right-wing Springer publishing house initiated a major propaganda campaign. Its *Bild* newspaper published an article with a headline insisting that public health regulations were "an unacceptable attack on one of our highest basic rights."

The Left Party's leader in parliament, Dietmar Bartsch, declared after the first far-right demonstration in Berlin on August 1, that it was necessary to conciliate with the participants. "Labelling them and excluding them doesn't help anyone," he told Deutschlandfunk. "There are right-wing extremists and really some idiots, but also many people who participated out of dissatisfaction."

This kind of whitewashing of a far-right march was already seen with the Islamophobic Pegida demonstrations, whose participants were described by politicians of all parties as "concerned citizens" who should be engaged in dialogue. At the time, the trivialisation of the protests served to make their far-right positions an acceptable part of political discourse and to undermine the widespread solidarity with refugees.

There can also be no doubt about the far-right character of the coronavirus demonstrations. They were organized by a broad spectrum of far-right and neo-Nazi organisations, from the NPD to the Identitarian Movement and the AfD. The AfD fascist Björn Höcke was present, as well as the right-wing extremist and notorious anti-Semite Jürgen Elsässer. Along with German imperial and military flags, Nazi insignia were also on display.

Along with backing from large sections of the media and political establishment, the right-wing extremists could also rely upon the support of the state apparatus. Although the previous demonstration saw the systematic violation of public health measures, and numerous statements opposing the wearing of masks and maintaining social distancing were circulating prior to the protest, Berlin's Administrative High Court issued a decision Friday night, allowing the demonstration to go ahead.

Earlier, Thomas Haldenwang, president of Germany's federal domestic intelligence service, declared that large

numbers of people “acting within the framework of the Basic Law” would gather at the demonstrations. Attempts by right-wing extremists to seize the leadership of such protests, he continued, had proven “not especially effective.” Haldenwang’s predecessor, Hans-Georg Maassen, spoke similarly about the right-wing extremist protests in Chemnitz two years ago. While the intelligence agency systematically downplays the role of right-wing extremists, it slanders those who dare to oppose them as “left-wing extremists.”

Ultimately, the demonstrators were all but invited by the police to use the Reichstag building as a backdrop for their propaganda. Even though right-wing extremists from across Germany had been announcing plans to storm Berlin for days, just 3,000 police officers were mobilised in the capital. When the issue was dealing with left-wing protesters against the G-20 in Hamburg, 10 times as many police were deployed. The stage for the demonstration was directly in front of the parliament building, but only three police officers were assigned to guard it.

Almost simultaneously with the scenes at the Reichstag building, three police officers spoke from the stage to the protesters at a nearby rally. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a retired police commissioner from Munich, a criminal investigator from Augsburg, and a unit leader from Franconia declared their support for the protest as police officers.

The fascist dregs of society were mobilised on Saturday in order to support the government’s policy of reopening the economy. The federal and state governments have already withdrawn or totally abandoned almost all measures to contain the spread of the pandemic. Schools and workplaces are opening under extremely unsafe conditions, preparing the way for a sharp rise in infections. The aim is to secure the profits of the banks and big business at the expense of thousands of lives.

This policy faces strong opposition from the vast majority of the German population. A poll by ZDF on Friday showed that 79 percent of respondents wanted stricter regulations on public events, something which the federal government had rejected just the day before. Action committees are being established at schools against their unsafe reopening, and workers are discussing strikes in the factories.

The plans for mass layoffs also face widespread opposition. Hundreds of thousands of jobs are to be destroyed in the auto industry, retail, and at airlines. Tensions are already reaching the boiling point.

The ruthless policy that is being pursued in the interests of big business is totally incompatible with even the most basic needs of the population. This is why, amid the deepening crisis of capitalism, the ruling elite is relying ever more

openly on dictatorial and fascistic forms of rule. Demonstrations like Saturday’s do not enjoy mass support, but are rather the product of the political establishment and the state apparatus. However, this does not make them any less dangerous.

In recent years, right-wing extremist networks have been established in the security forces, and fascist ideology has been made politically acceptable once again. Steinmeier, who now claims to be outraged at the waving of flags of the German Empire, was heavily involved in this. When the AfD entered parliament, he declared it was necessary to remove the “walls of irreconcilability” against right-wing extremist positions. Subsequently, he invited the AfD’s two parliamentary group leaders for talks at his residence, Bellevue Palace.

In the subsequent months, the CDU and SPD plotted the creation of the grand coalition in drawn-out talks behind the backs of the population. This resulted in the crowning of the AfD as the official opposition and the implementation of its far-right policies by the coalition. This applies to the creation of a network of refugee detention centres, the staggering growth of social inequality and the rearming of the military.

The coronavirus pandemic is accelerating these developments. The true state of class relations under capitalism is being exposed. As in the United States, where Trump is relying ever more openly on fascistic groups to suppress protests against police violence, the ruling elite wants to intimidate all its opponents with reactionary far-right forces.

The rise of the far right can therefore only be stopped by an independent political movement of the working class, which is directed against not only the right-wing extremists, but all of the establishment parties and the grand coalition, which applauds the far right and strengthens its organisations. It must be directed against the roots of fascism, nationalism, and war: the capitalist profit system. This is the perspective fought for by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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