

Germany's election campaign at the expense of refugees

Marianne Arens
6 December 2024

With Trump's election to the presidency, millions of immigrants without a green card are being threatened with deportation and made fair game in the United States. In Germany, too, the campaign against refugees and migrants is a central element in February's early general election. They are the first victims of the austerity and pro-war policies of all the establishment parties.

Politicians and journalists are engaging in an almost unbearable nationalist smear campaign. The tenor was set by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chancellor candidate Friedrich Merz, when he claimed that migrants would “get their teeth redone” at the expense of German taxpayers, in the language of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). On the Maischberger talk show on December 4, he ominously announced: “The returns at the border will come when we are in power. They are legally permissible, technically feasible, and I think they are politically necessary.”

Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrat, SPD) also boasts that his party was responsible for the sharp decline in the number of asylum seekers under the coalition government with the Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP). He said this at the start of the election campaign on November 30, in the same speech in which he described his party as the “voice of the hardworking and decent.” At the migration summit in September, Scholz boasted that his government had achieved the “greatest turnaround in dealing with irregular migration.” At the same time, his interior minister and head of the police, Nancy Faeser (SPD), organised the first deportation flights to Syria and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Cem Özdemir (Greens) called for a tougher asylum policy in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, justifying this by saying that his daughter had bad experiences with “men with a migration background.”

The Left Party and its anti-migrant splinter, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), are also fuelling hostility towards foreigners, with Wagenknecht using every opportunity to call migrants and refugees “wage suppressors,” “strike breakers” and “elements alien to our culture.” She criticises the now defunct federal coalition from the right and calls for “very radical measures” to reduce the number of asylum seekers. Bodo Ramelow, the first and so far only state premier from the Left Party, boasts that the number of deportations in Thuringia has risen significantly under his government.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) categorically rejects the frenzied agitation against refugees, the tightening of asylum laws and the entire conduct of politics on the backs of migrants. As we did in the European election campaign, we are now appealing to workers, young people and all those who reject racism and fascism to defend refugees and democratic rights.

The so-called “refugee question” is not just one issue among many, but an integral component of bourgeois politics. It is the mechanism by which the ruling class justifies the massive expansion of state violence and divides the internationally networked working class. It fuels a climate of national backwardness that it needs for its imperialist war policy. In doing

so, it makes the most oppressed into scapegoats for a crisis that is really due to the profit lust of the super-rich and a policy of massive rearmament and war.

Now, in the campaign for February's early general election, these attacks are taking on extreme and barbaric forms. They are being directed against refugees and migrants who have come to Germany from crisis areas at the risk of their lives, from Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia, Palestine, Kurdistan, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria or other war- and crisis-torn countries. Each has undergone a dangerous odyssey, traversing routes such as the Mediterranean, a mass grave for thousands, or walking for months along the Balkan route, often taking small children by the hand. Most are traumatised when they arrive here.

But how are they received? More than half are immediately rejected. According to the latest report by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), “the overall rate of those offered protection was 45.7 percent.”

Deportations

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees divides refugees into nine different categories, all with different rights. The head of a refugee shelter in Hesse, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that “asylum entitlement under paragraph 16,” granting asylum to people who are persecuted politically in their home country, was extremely rare.

“In the last two years, I have not seen anyone receive a positive asylum decision,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “To get this recognition, you would have to reach Germany by ship and ask for asylum—which hardly ever happens.” If at all, most receive only a limited “refugee status.”

However, anyone entering from a so-called safe “third country”—and that includes all countries surrounding Germany—is to be deported there according under the EU's Dublin Regulations. “Most,” he continued, “are so-called Dublin cases, and are sent back to Italy or Austria.”

A large group concerns people who are required to leave the country due to a negative asylum decision, but who are granted a “Duldung.” This is a “tolerated stay permit,” a temporary status for those who are required to leave the country but cannot be deported because the situation in their country of origin is currently considered unsafe. There are about 120,000 of such individuals in Germany. More and more often, they are also suddenly threatened with expulsion because the German government has re-evaluated their country of origin and withdraws their “toleration.”

Our contact reported that even Iraq was now considered “safe.” He knows several Iraqi men—“hardworking men who work at the post office”—who now have to fear their deportation.

The deportations often lead to open conflicts between the authorities and

ordinary citizens. In Bremen on December 3, the police failed when they tried to remove a refugee from the sanctuary of a Protestant church. Up to 100 Bremen residents, including the pastor of the parish, opposed the police action. The Somali man was to be taken to Finland because he had entered the EU via the Russian border and was first registered there.

Austerity measures and victimisation: the “payment card”

Refugees are the first victims of the austerity measures being carried out in the federal states. These are worsening staffing levels for those looking after refugees in the communities. In addition, cash benefits for personal needs are being switched to a special “payment card,” which must be introduced in all federal states by March 2025. The card immediately marks out the bearer as an asylum seeker.

In Hesse, Heike Hofmann (SPD), state Minister for Labour, Integration, Youth and Social Affairs in the cabinet of Boris Rhein (CDU), will begin introducing the payment card in December. The cards will first be issued to all beneficiaries entering the country at the initial reception centre in Giessen, and later in the municipalities. The discussion about this has revealed how miserably refugees in Germany have to live.

The private needs of a single refugee, for example, are set at €204 per month, which is significantly lower than the already low amount for a “citizen’s income” welfare recipient. With the payment card, people in Hesse are now only allowed to withdraw €50 per month in cash from this amount.

For many who buy their food at a local Turkish or Afghan shop, this makes their previous way of life almost impossible. Even if they have somewhere to live, a cash allowance of just €50 a month is tantamount to exclusion from social and cultural life. Every bottle of water or cup of coffee/tea, every mobile phone card, every journey by bus, tram or train, every cultural or leisure event and even every visit to a public toilet costs money.

The payment card is essentially used to better monitor and control refugees. It is not possible to make transfers, especially abroad, even to one’s own family in the home country. Refugees are also not allowed to open a bank account. The card is restricted to the region in which the person concerned lives, and thus further restricts what is left of their “freedom of movement.”

The payment card is also anything but a “relief for local authorities from administrative tasks.” The refugee charity Pro Asyl writes that nuisances such as the payment card primarily serves the purpose of “making life difficult for people here and deterring them.” Those who work with refugees locally and actually have to implement the introduction of the card in the municipalities “are already dreading the additional work.”

The state governments claim that the payment card is an important instrument for limiting illegal migration, combatting the scourge of people smuggling and relieving the municipalities of administrative tasks. “Every single one of these claims is nonsense,” said the Hesse Refugee Council in a statement entitled “Discrimination à la carte.”

Anyone who has a permanent job is freed from having to use the payment card, but this is hardly possible for very many.

Low-wage work and exploitation

Many refugees who have jobs toil in the hardest and worst-paid jobs: in food-service, construction, transport and logistics. Large corporations are

now also profiting from this form of exploitation. However, this is mainly through temporary employment agencies, which provide them with cheap labour for areas such as cleaning, security, service and canteens, etc. More than 10,000 refugees work in Germany’s top companies, a study by Mediendienst Integration found.

The manager of a refugee shelter mentioned above said: “To work, people have to get the approval of the immigration office, which can take weeks. By then, the job is often gone. And there are tough cases,” he continued. “It happens almost every day that employers or landlords take advantage of them and exploit them. We are the point of intersection with the authorities. Christmas is just around the corner, and the postal service is hiring people on a temporary basis, not just through subcontractors.”

He reported on a case in which a refugee who works for the postal service injured his hand on a package. “He didn’t want to go to the doctor or take sick leave for fear of losing his job.”

The pressure under which refugees are forced to live became clear when he reported on several Ukrainians: they had to prove to the immigration authorities that they had only come to Germany after February 21, 2022 (the beginning of the war). “Until they can prove this, they will be assigned to us in the shelter, but they will get no money, no [health] insurance, nothing. That means they are left standing in front of the door and starving. For a while, you could see how they were getting thinner every week.”

In Bavaria, state Premier Markus Söder has announced he will cut benefits for those who “do not cooperate” (that is, do not voluntarily leave the country) to “bed, bread, soap.” He will also ensure that asylum seekers do community service work. In the public sector in Bavaria, 5,000 additional jobs are being created. These include “services in large accommodation centres themselves, as well as in museums, gardens or canteens.”

This “community service” is characterised by the fact that it is not paid or is paid extremely poorly, at least not at the going rate. Overall, the authorities’ refugee policy is continuing the traditions of the German state reminiscent of the Nazi era, when big business was able to maximise its profits through the extreme exploitation of Jews, prisoners of war, foreign workers and other disenfranchised groups.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact