

Support for Werner Braeuner

Dear friends and comrades

Last February, Werner Braeuner, an unemployed engineer from the Bremen region of Germany, killed the manager of his job centre. Since then he has been in prison, awaiting trial.

We would like to help him. Some of us are friends of Werner or have corresponded with him; others are members of organisations representing the unemployed and those in insecure work in France. We believe that we understand his act, since the problems that confronted Werner were not significantly different from those that we -- or people close to us -- experience every day.

We recognise that, in such a context, organising a support campaign is problematic. Any intemperate action or posturing could prejudice his situation.

Accordingly, we have decided to put together a simple statement. This includes basic information about the killing itself and the chain of circumstances that brought him to it (his financial difficulties, his psychological vulnerability, the personal problems that accentuated his sense of despair). It also talks about Werner himself, his political activities and his beliefs. In addition we think it is crucial to outline the social context within which this act occurred, in order to show the evolution of the treatment being handed out to the unemployed in Germany and, more generally, throughout Europe.

Finally, we beg you not to react to this individual act with moral reprobation. Please consider the increasingly pitiless and authoritarian treatment that society reserves for those that it marginalises and how this inevitably leads to irrational acts of this kind. This is a collective problem and repression -- a repression that the forces of law and order, determined to reduce this act to its individual dimension, will inevitably demand -- will have no effect upon the factors that brought it about. Only radical social change can prevent the proliferation of this sort of desperate individual act.

We ask you to circulate this document as widely as possible, to publish it, to lend it your public support and to respond in writing with your own reactions, so that this story is not buried in silence as Werner has been behind prison gates.

Hopefully this will constitute the basis of a Europe-wide support campaign, in order to prepare public opinion for the trial, which is expected to begin on August 2nd or 3rd, 2001.

The friends of Werner Braeuner in France

The real criminal is this social logic

On the morning of February 6th, 2001, Werner Braeuner, an unemployed person living in Verden, in the Bremen region of Germany, stabbed to death Klaus Herzberg, an official at his local Arbeitsamt (job centre). Herzberg had cut off his benefits, his only means of survival. Subsequently, Werner turned himself in to the police.

Who is Werner Braeuner ?

Werner, 46 year old, is an engineer. For the last eight years he has been unemployed. He has campaigned for a reduction in working hours, for a guaranteed income and for a society of free individuals, not reduced to a state of catatonia by work. He often translated French texts for German associations of the unemployed.

In France, he was familiar to campaigners against unemployment for his contributions to the AC Forum internet list, for his sense of humour, his sense of irony, his basic decency, for the spirit of revolt that animated him and for his very colourful use of French.

He has never done anything that would endear him to the sort of leftists who are now to be found in government. The positions he has taken, critical of the German Greens' links with the oil lobby and of the productivity-oriented policies of the social democrats, easily explain the silence that has surrounded his case. His ideas were debatable - indeed, they were often debated within the unemployed movement -- but they were always thought-provoking and left nobody indifferent.

Press reports have described the act as premeditated. The local newspaper and Das Bild (firebrand of the German gutter press), in particular, were only too pleased to seize upon someone they could present as an extremist, a symbol of the anticapitalist struggle. Accordingly, they were quick to claim that his real motive was to prevent a press conference on unemployment statistics, due to be held at the local Arbeitsamt on the same day. In effect, they were writing the public prosecutor's closing speech for him !

In fact, many of the details that appeared in the press were completely fabricated, particularly the alleged friendship between Werner and the landlady from whom he rented a room in an old farm and who described him as spending too much time at his computer (we would like to add: in conversation with friends from all corners of Europe) when he should have been out looking for work.

At the same time, of course, these papers are careful not to inform their readers of the existence, in Germany, of 76,000 unemployed engineers, most of them the same age as Werner. Nor do they explain why these people should devote most of their lives to the hopeless, hope-destroying search for a non-existent job.

The context; the reasons

Over the last few years, life has been especially hard for Werner and he has suffered as a result. Financial difficulties, the lack of space in his former accommodation and the associated personal tensions brought about his forced separation from his partner. Several months before the birth of his daughter, he had to take a room in a neighbouring village.

In July 2000, he applied for a training course and was accepted. Five months later, at the end of November, demoralised by the fact that half his time on the course was spent sitting around doing nothing, he decided to give it up. He had already written -- and made public -- two letters in which he explained his reasons to Herr Herzberg, upon whom the decision to continue his benefits depended. Herzberg, however, had his orders and seemed convinced that they were well-founded. At Werner's next attendance at the job centre, he ignored his arguments and announced his intention of terminating his benefits.

Mired down in a worsening psychological situation, suffering from intense back pains, overwhelmed by official harassment, Werner was, moreover, threatened in mid January with being struck off the register. Early in February, he received notification that his benefit was being terminated.

Like many claimants in such circumstances, he contemplated suicide. Instead, however, he reacted and, on the morning of February 6, 2001, he went for an interview with Herr Herzberg, the man who, as far as his day-to-day life was concerned, embodied this inhuman system. It was then that, overwhelmed by a sense of the injustice he had suffered and unable to control himself, he killed him.

He rebelled against a machine; but he killed a man.

Still in shock, he turned himself in to the police and, later on, made a sworn statement before a judge. He was then committed to custody and spent the next two and a half months sharing a tiny cell with a co-detainee. Gradually, with horror, he became aware of the catastrophe he had brought about: a man's death, the grief of the Herzberg family and of his own; the sorrow inflicted upon his wife and child.

Why we should defend him

Werner's story is like that of many long-term unemployed. When you lose your job like this, your material circumstances deteriorate; the provisional solutions that you are forced to adopt become permanent; and your personal relationships become strained and collapse. Society has thrown you on the scrap-heap, leaving you to

deal as best you can with the resulting feelings of failure and uselessness. (In response, Werner chose political activism and collective analysis -- a choice that many French claimants can understand only too well.)

Now, however, the governments of various European countries insist that unemployed individuals should assume the responsibility for their own predicament and are imposing schemes to facilitate an "escape" from unemployment. Unfortunately, these schemes are often worse than the survival strategies that do, on the whole, allow you to establish a certain minimal equilibrium. They tend to involve jobs that are too insecure and too badly paid to allow you to find decent housing and rebuild your life; more or less phoney training schemes that leave you feeling bewildered and useless, without offering you anything at the end.

This is the logic of the "struggle against unemployment": massive lay-offs and schemes like the British New Deal or the French PARE (Plan d'Aide au Retour à l'Emploi: Assisted Return to Work Plan). It's the same in Germany, where the government has nothing better to propose, to meet its election promise to solve the unemployment problem, than to intensify the control and repression of the unemployed, without resolving the fundamental issues.

Given this situation, and in the absence of any perspective that might open up the possibility of collective resistance, it is hardly surprising that individuals should blow a fuse and physically attack the immediate agents of this policy. In the United States, incidents of this sort have increased to the point where they are beginning to constitute a social phenomenon. What has Europe to gain from masking the problems created by growing social polarisation, intensifying the constraints upon the poorest and pushing them to desperation and despair ?

The violence of Werner's act may be repellant; but it was a direct reaction to the violence he had suffered and to a feeling of powerlessness. He is like a gauge, registering rising pressure. Unfortunately, the judicial system is likely to do everything in its power to prevent the social dimension of this incident from coming to the fore. It is up to us to ensure that acts like this cannot be reduced to simple judicial cases, and to demonstrate that what is really criminal is the social logic that drives men like Werner to despair.

Werner has already paid the price for his deed during the eight long years of unemployment and marginalisation that preceded it. It would, therefore, be all the more unjust to take some sort of "vengeance" against him -- especially since this cannot bring Herr Herzberg back to life.

His deed calls out to us all: the unemployed, workers, the exploited -- all of us for whom the existence, within a wealthy society, of unemployment-related poverty remains and will remain intolerable.

We must not let Werner down !

You can also :

- write to Werner at the following address: Werner Braeuner, JVA Verden, Stifhofstr.10, 27283 Verden. Germany
- contact us by email: wbraeuner.support@free.fr
- show your solidarity by writing to his lawyer: Michael BRENNECKE, 63 Obernstrasse, D-28832 Achim, Germany.

Please sign this support :

AC! Agir Ensemble Contre le Chômage

Heike

Jeanne Revel

Eric Ducoing

Sylvie Cercier

Charles de Cock

Dany Rétorré

Bruno Morin

Philippe Cahuzac

Laurent Guilloteau

Stephan

Laurent Gatard

Joël Perdriau

Hélène Dahan

Frank S.F.

Gianni Carrozza

Nicole Thé

François Kergunteuil

Jean Philippe Petit

Christophe Souliè

Anne

Pierre Nicolazo

Eric Laffleter

Laurent Berthelot

Remy Querbouet

Lilian Truchon
Donald Hounan

...