

West Germany

Students work around the state

by Peter Michalyszyn

In January, 1978, extraordinary legislation was completed which outlawed political activism among elected student representatives of universities in the state of Baden-Württemberg, West Germany.

In West Germany last summer, only a couple of years after the so-called *Framework Law for Higher Education* had been implemented in all other German states, student opposition to the stifling legislation was all but nil; one had to force a comment from one unelected student activist: "Well, of course we oppose the (framework) law, but...."

But a law, after all, was just a law. Adjustments were made. New channels of political activity were found through which the highly politicized German youth expressed itself; shortly before I arrived with an international group of student journalists at the invitation of the West German government, over 40,000 people, predominantly students, rallied in Bonn. They protested against nuclear weapons, and against cutbacks in education funding, library closures, student aid, and housing shortages.

The word of the 1975 *Framework Act* — the legislation which regulates student activities at universities, among other things — would clearly have outlawed this organized student protest against the larger political issue of nuclear armaments.

The law said explicitly that it was not legal (and therefore subject to court judgement) to take a general political mandate of the official student body and use it as the basis for intensive and unrestricted expression for non-university-related political opinions and demands.

The obvious solution for student representatives — who by virtue of being elected collected a mandatory, though modest student fee — was to place larger political opinions and demands in the context of student concerns.

Thus: "Scholarships instead of Pershing II missiles!" was a common cry for students opposing nuclear rearmament in West Germany while simultaneously protesting against the government's inadequate (they said) student aid scholarship program.

"As far as an ideological line we fight for student interests. But all student interests should be progressive issues with an aim toward social change — because we realize that fighting just for students' might be unfair, in the sense that student rights can be seen often as privileges and we consider it unfair to give one group in society an unfair advantage...." one West German student told us.

"...so, by putting student issues in the wider context of social change, the student movement rationalizes itself."

Some observers think the *Framework Act* was meant to rationalize the student movement out of existence. The *Act*, which sets guidelines to be followed and elaborated upon by each West German state, was seen as a backlash against leftist student activism in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

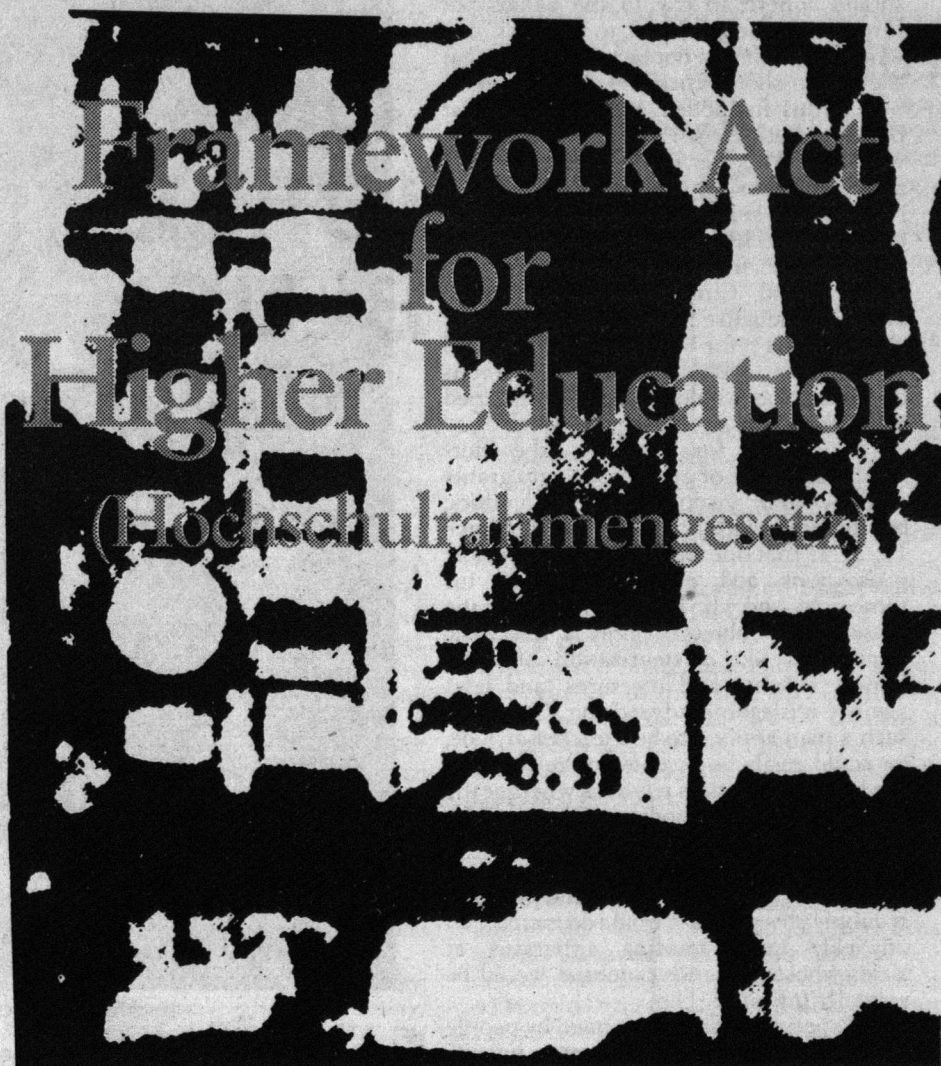
Government view

It is actively disinterested

"The Ministry of Education is actively disinterested in the student government," we were informed by the president of Munich university.

"They consider it a nuisance. They would rather it didn't exist," he said. Why? Is it merely a backlash against student activism and violence in the 1960's? Can West Germans so easily accept the forced closure of democratic student organizations?

In the states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg there are not even student corporate bodies, known elsewhere as ASTAs. "Students who became members of a university community did not automatically want to become members of a political community," one official told us.



That view was argued by a Canadian professor on leave in Berlin in early 1970's — the formative years of the *Act*. Robert H. Keyserlingk said in the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Bulletin:

All of this (Act deliberations) must be seen against a background of serious student unrest and radicalism. Most university departments have "red cells" which employ Marxist terminology, resort to strikes and public pressure to bring about closed Marxist professors....members of the "red cells" and their professors are filled with a strong dislike for the liberal society and parliamentary procedure. They search for a new "lifestyle" which has less to do with politics than psychology and they hold fast to the Rousseauist belief that revolutions are made through education and culture.

Keyserlingk added that these "red cells" opposed the *Framework Act*, labelling it a "refusal to democratize the university in favor of specialized formulations as required by the capitalist profit-making interests."

German students in the 1960's, to be sure, were highly politicized, but the *Framework Act* was not passed merely to defuse the kind of right wing paranoia of leftist radicalism evidenced above. Student activism was largely unfocused, indeed a backlash a 'class' system of education, against Vietnam, against a variety of social

issues that created lecture and exam disruptions, massive demonstrations, violence, and later, terrorism.

However, equally precipitous of the *Framework Act* were educational reforms from the 1950's and '60s finally taking effect. The old imperial model of 'class' education was being dismantled; children of workers had opportunity where none had before existed to get university training; the doors opened wide as government realized only seven per cent of the

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student age group attended universities, compared to fifteen per cent in other countries. Tuition was cancelled; scholarships offered. In a ten year span, the university population doubled to one million; government spent some 25 billion marks (over 50 billion 1982 \$Cdn.) building the new university infrastructure. One example of the incredible growth was the fact that the average age of professors fell by 20 years.

In these tumultuous times, government tried to regain some control over the universities; consulting with state governments it devised the *Framework Act*, not only to pacify students but to establish some order and uniformity in West German universities.

Students were not the only constituency to balk at the *Act*, the implementation of which was left to individual states. The president of Munich University told us the *Act* was "a terrible influence on the university" that sought to regulate just about everything. However, he also said German universities had no great tradition of university autonomy; rather, the freedom rested with individual professors and students who could teach and learn (respectively) with great latitude.

The *Framework Act* allowed for the legalization of the official student body on campus — the ASTA — the elected student executive body. The ASTA collects a nominal fee from students and represents students on various university committees. It is this body which is confined strictly to campus politics.

Unofficial student political groups abound however, at least six of which loosely could be called national

organizations. They range in political temper from the moderate right, the RCDS, to liberal, to socialist, to Marxist, and to the "basisgruppen" — a broad spectrum of single-issue activists.

These 'political parties' field candidates in the ASTA elections, and according to students we spoke with, ASTAs across West Germany are controlled predominantly by leftist coalitions of the various parties; only two ASTAs are controlled by either the conservative or liberal groups.

If the student movement in West Germany is dedicated to social change, then the primary vehicle of social change — after large demonstrations (which Western Europeans seems fairly adept at staging) — are leaflets. Even though the *Framework Law* outlaws ASTAs' printing leaflets addressing outside political issues, every day students are assailed with new pamphlets calling for an end to nuclear proliferation, crying out against environmental destruction, or protesting housing shortages and inadequate student scholarships. Absent here is a free and objective student press: the modest ASTA monthly newspapers are organs of whatever student political group happens to be in power; the editor is appointed by the ASTA and defers questions of editorial stance to it. One editor we spoke with could not conceive of student newspapers in Canada not being harassed by the 'authorities' for printing subversive material; as well, she held the view that her paper had no obligation to air the political views of those not in power.

All of this was evidence of student representation that was solely political. Student services were non-existent: there were no bars or cafeterias run by students; nor were there exam registries, no tradition of service such as pervades Canadian universities. In fact, the government provided many of those type of services.

At a higher level of political activity, some ASTAs try to send aid or money to foreign countries. For example, we were told of an incident about two years ago when an ASTA in Bonn sent money to El Salvador to buy arms. The rival political

opposition complained, and the ASTA was forced to pay a fine. However, in Berlin, an ASTA sent money in support to Nicaragua; no one complained. Why? One student told us the government was easing up on the *Framework Law* for fear of losing the student constituency or driving it in to the radical camp. As well, the students were skillful conspirators, often giving international donations under the guise of an international medical aid committee.

Yet, many of those we talked with, students and administrators, agreed that a sort of radicalization was imminent among West German students — not violent necessarily (but it was not ruled out), but in reaction, for example, to housing crises.

"The government at the moment does everything to force this reaction," said one student, complaining about educational cutbacks and nuclear war in the same breath.

"There has been so much deterioration in the past six years. Now the problems are so big that students cannot ignore them," another told us.

Nuclear arms have created great unrest among students: "There is no controversy; we are all against it." Yet, the radicalism is different from that experienced (and rejected by older West Germans) in the late 1960's.

"We have to change by and by. We cannot think we can have a revolution immediately because this is impossible."

Gateway editor Peter Michalyszyn toured West Germany for two weeks last June/July at the invitation of the West German government.