We are here to stay

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Africans living under the shadow of removal in Hamburg have been able to articulate their own agenda, writes Klaus Neumann, and football fans and residents are backing them.

Africans and their supporters demonstrating in St Pauli on 25 October. HamburgNews

St Pauli Football Club played in front of a home crowd at Hamburg’s Millerntor stadium on 25 October. The team was fifth on the ladder, and its fans were probably dreaming of promotion to the Bundesliga, the top German league, which St Pauli has joined only once in the past ten years. Almost 28,000 were there that Friday night to watch their team take on low-ranked SV Sandhausen. After ninety minutes, though, St Pauli could probably count itself lucky that the game ended in a nil-all draw.

If it hadn’t been for what happened next, the evening would have quickly been forgotten. Thousands gathered outside the southern stand wielding placards and banners, some of which had been unfurled during the game. From the stadium they marched to St Pauli, the church that gave the suburb – and hence the football club – its name. The demonstrators leading the march carried a large banner with a text in English that read, “We are here to stay.” The police, who had anticipated the march but expected no more than 1000 demonstrators, estimated the crowd at 5000. The organisers claimed 10,000 people joined the march.

Given that it’s not long since St Pauli was relegated to the third division, “We are here to stay” might have reflected fans’ feelings about the club’s mixed fortunes on the football field. The demonstrators were not calling for the sacking of coach Michael Frontzeck, however; what they wanted was the resignation of Olaf Scholz, the head of Hamburg’s state government. But mostly they were chanting in support of those carrying the banner at the head of the protest march: a group of African men who have been threatened with removal by the state government.

In June I wrote about 300 irregular migrants who had arrived in Hamburg after they were reportedly released from a reception centre by Italian authorities and each given €500 and a temporary residence permit valid for all Schengen countries. According to an Italian newspaper report, at least some of the migrants were also given train tickets to Germany. The people who ended up in Hamburg – mainly from Mali, Ghana, Togo and Ivory Coast – had left jobs in Libya after the situation of sub-Saharan Africans in Libya became increasingly perilous following the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi. Their first port of call was the Italian island of Lampedusa, which lies only about 300 kilometres north of the Libyan coast.

The authorities in Hamburg made the Italian practice public in May. By then, the Africans had been in Germany’s second-largest city for almost three months. Until April, they had been supported by a winter relief program funded by the state government, but now they were homeless and living on the street. Their money had long run out, and their three-month residence permits were about to expire. For the authorities in Hamburg, the solution was obvious: Italy was the first country of asylum, and it was obliged to look after them. After some diplomatic wrangling, the Italians conceded as much, and on 30 May the German interior ministry announced that the Italian government had agreed to take the Africans back.
For the past six months, however, the Africans have been seeking support for their demands to remain in Hamburg. On 22 May, a delegation unsuccessfully tried to meet with Olaf Scholz. On 29 May, their plight occasioned heated debates in the Bürgerschaft, Hamburg’s state parliament, when the Left Party and the Greens accused the governing Social Democrats of violating the Africans’ human rights.

Following Italy’s offer to take them back, the state government announced that it would accommodate the Africans in a vacant school, where their identities would be checked by the police. This plan was immediately condemned by the leaders of the Protestant Church, who argued that the offer was designed to make it easier to process them and facilitate their removal.

On 4 June, the parish of St Pauli, with the support of the church hierarchy, offered shelter to eighty of the migrants. Asked by a journalist how long they would be allowed to stay in the church, St Pauli’s pastor said, “A host welcoming guests must not immediately ask, ‘When are you going to leave?’” He also clarified that his church was not offering asylum to the migrants, and that the willingness to help ought to be seen as an act of hospitality. Although the church didn’t invoke its traditional right to grant asylum to fugitives, so far the police haven’t attempted to enter its premises to question or detain the migrants.

Several trade unions have also come out in support of the Africans, some of whom have joined Ver.di, Germany’s largest and most powerful union, which represents public servants. The unions, the churches, refugee advocacy organisations, and a large number of locals support the Africans’ demand that they all be given residence and work rights, and reject the state government’s compromise plan for their cases to be assessed on an individual basis. While the African men are often referred to as “refugees,” that term is used in a loose sense, without any reference to the legal definition in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The protests over the government’s handling of the case have intensified since June. With the onset of autumn, the church hosting the Africans applied for a permit to erect accommodation containers. The state government refused to grant the permit, but it was outmanoeuvred by the local council, which sided with the church. Some of the Africans have agreed to reveal their identities in return for a Duldung, a temporary stay of removal until their cases have been investigated, but a majority of them still insists on a political rather than an administrative or juridical solution. Public support for the migrants remains strong. Another protest march on the 2–3 November weekend attracted twice as many demonstrators as the protest after the St Pauli–Sandhausen game.

The drowning of hundreds of irregular migrants near Lampedusa in early October invited comparisons between European and Australian responses to “boat people.” Sociologist Claudia Tazreiter, for example, writing for the ABC’s Drum, judged “the reactions to the human tragedies of lives lost at sea attempting to find refuge” to be “shockingly divergent in the European and Australian case.” And it is certainly true that the rhetoric of European leaders after the tragedy in the Mediterranean starkly differs from that of Australian leaders after similar events off our shores. But both the European Union and Australia are committed to preventing the arrival of irregular migrants, irrespective of whether they turn out to be refugees as defined in the 1951 UN Convention. The Australian government has put a high-ranking military commander in charge of its attempts to thwart the arrival of asylum seekers, and the European Union’s equivalent efforts have been coordinated by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, or Frontex, which was created in 2004 to block irregular access to member states. Neither in Europe nor in Australia has the militarisation of border control resulted in fewer deaths at the border.

Yet the events unfolding in Hamburg couldn’t have occurred in Australia. Why is that? First, the rhetoric of Hamburg’s political leaders is different from that of Australia’s leaders. In Australia, politicians from both major parties have been guilty of condoning, if not eliciting, irrational fears of “boat people” in the interest of electoral gain. In Germany, since the pogroms of Hoyerswerda (in 1991) and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (in 1992), in which rioting neo-Nazis tried to burn down asylum seeker hostels, German politicians seem to know that the vilification of asylum seekers releases a dangerous genie that can’t easily be put back into its bottle. Political and community leaders are usually quick in condemning local protests against asylum seekers, which still happen frequently, particularly in East Germany. Last weekend, for example, residents of the small town of Schneeberg in Saxonia rallied against the accommodation of asylum seekers in a former army barracks. As has been the case elsewhere, the protests were engineered by the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany. Perhaps
surprisingly, the zero tolerance approach to overt xenophobia among all parties in federal parliament has not resulted in a vacuum on the right of the political spectrum; in the recent federal elections, the National Democrats won just 1.3 per cent of the vote.

Inner-city Hamburg is a world away from Schneeberg. Radical political positions that could exist only on the fringes in Australia enjoy the support of a significant section of the community, reflecting well-established political cultures that allow radical critiques to flourish. The *metamorphosis of St Pauli FC* is a good example of what that makes possible in some German cities. A few years ago, the club deliberately embraced an alternative political and cultural agenda, which enabled it to attract a new fan base. While other clubs in the Bundesliga struggled to control fans who heap racist abuse on opposition players and supporters, St Pauli fans pride themselves on their commitment to anti-racism and anti-sexism.

Hamburg is not the only German city that provides an environment conducive to protests by and in support of irregular migrants. In Berlin, some 200 asylum seekers – most of whom also entered Europe via Lampedusa – have been camping for more than a year at Oranienplatz in Kreuzberg. While Berlin’s state government would like to send them back to Italy, the local council has so far refused to play ball. Much like St Pauli and neighbouring suburbs in Hamburg, Kreuzberg has a vibrant alternative political and cultural scene; the gulf between it and mainstream Germany became obvious at the last local elections when the Greens and the Pirate Party shared half the vote while the Christian Democrats attracted only about 8 per cent.

Perhaps the most important difference between Germany and Australia, however, is not so much to do with Germans or Australians as with the irregular migrants themselves. The Africans in Hamburg, much like similar groups in other German cities, have been able to articulate their own agenda. It was they, rather than their supporters, who first demanded that a political solution be found that allows all 300 Africans to remain in Germany. Admittedly, it is difficult to view that kind of agency in isolation – it only becomes possible in a cultural context in which the voices of people without rights are listened to, and in which these voices can then be amplified.

Because the people sleeping in the St Pauli church speak for themselves, the relationship between the Africans and their German supporters resembles a coalition (albeit with a junior partner whose resources are limited). In this case at least, refugee advocates cannot represent migrants as voiceless and sufferers, and have to respect the fact that the migrants’ *political* demands may differ from their own.

While refugee advocates in Australia are often driven by their own compassion, and then try to elicit compassion, if not pity, in their campaigns, much of the European response to irregular migrants is marked by a sense of solidarity. Even the Pope, discussing irregular migrants during his visit to Lampedusa in July, seemed to *rate solidarity* more highly than compassion. In the short term, the emotions directed towards the suffering victim can be immensely powerful. But such emotions are fickle, and they don’t offer a long-term perspective. In comparison to the surge of feeling associated with compassion, the energy generated by a sense of solidarity may be weak, but unlike compassion, solidarity anticipates a viable future relationship between partners.

In her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt, who believed that solidarity could – and ought to – “inspire and guide action,” put her finger on why sentiments are of dubious value in the fight for social and political justice:

> Without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others.

The supporters of the African migrants recently argued their case in their *St Pauli Manifesto*. They took a stance, they say, “because we want to, because we are able to, and because we have to… We are confident that what we do can, could be done by any neighbourhood in Hamburg or anywhere else in this country. We want to set an example, one example of many. Anybody could follow it.” While that might not apply to Schneeberg or Western...
Sydney, it seems worth keeping a close watch on what is possible in St Pauli. Maybe the unconventional success story of the local football club could be replicated in an arena where people are fighting for what Hannah Arendt called “the right to have rights.” •