

1.4.5 CIVILIAN SERVICE MAY 2010

THE TWILIGHT OF THE CIVVIES: GERMANY TO SCALE BACK MANDATORY CIVILIAN SERVICE

05/21/2010

By Candice Novak

Angela Merkel's cabinet moved this week to shorten the country's obligatory military conscription from nine months down to six. But the move will also mean deep cuts to the civilian service required of conscientious objectors that, over the years, has become a vital part of the German social safety net.

Michael Sonntag may have a breathing tube taped to his throat, but he's still a real talker. Most of the people in the Berlin facility for the handicapped where he is a resident have trouble speaking or can't do so at all. But Sonntag takes up the slack, and these days he knows he is speaking on behalf of his fellow residents.

The man, in his fifties, has been thinking a lot about the news lately. The German government is pushing through legislation that would cut the length of the country's *Zivildienst*, or civilian service, in a way that could have serious consequences for the residents of the St. Elisabeth Haus. For years, young men – and some women -- fresh out of high school have helped out at the facility as civilian service workers. The cuts in the duration of time the “Zivis,” or “civvies,” as they are affectionately dubbed by Germans, will inevitably mean there will be less care provided to patients like Sonntag. It will also bring additional burdens for the professional staff and deprive patients of personal friendships with the civvies they have long cherished.

“It is us who will have to live with it,” says Sonntag, who has been in the care of the St. Elisabeth House, a home run by Germany's Catholic charity Caritas, in Berlin's Lichtenrade district for the past decade. During those 10 years, dozens of civvies spent the better part of a year providing Sonntag and St. Elisabeth's 47 other residents with care. Once the new rules are applied in July, though, the mandatory period will be reduced to six months.

An Expensive Tradition

The civvies make up an important part of Germany's cradle-to-grave social safety net. As recently as a decade ago, as many as 130,000 young people participated in the program -- set up as an alternative to obligatory military service for young men registered as conscientious objectors and for female volunteers -- each year, doing volunteer work for a stint of 13 months. They were posted by the government in retirement homes, hospitals and facilities for

the handicapped. But in recent years, the length of civilian service has fallen -- the last cuts made in 2004 dropped service to just nine months. The number of participants have declined too. In April, 38,000 of the 111,000 civilian service posts across the country remained vacant.

But the program is also costly for the government, with an estimated price tag of €631 million in 2010 alone. Around 85 percent of that money goes towards the civvies' pay -- a modest €10 per day -- and room and board. The government has slowly dismantled the program over the years, and the latest cuts are expected to save around €180 million.

The new legislation is part of a deal forged between Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP). In its election campaign, the FDP had pledged to eliminate conscription altogether and switch to a purely professional and volunteer military and civilian service program, noting that only seven European countries still have mandatory armed forces service. But Merkel's conservatives want to maintain the tradition.

Ultimately, the two parties reached a compromise -- and the amount of time spent in either the military or civilian service will be reduced to six months beginning in July. The deal, agreed by Merkel's cabinet on Wednesday, also includes a provision allowing civvies to voluntarily extend their service by three to six months -- a decision the government estimates about one-third will make.

“The civilian service program has been saved,” Family Minister Kristina Schröder of the CDU told SPIEGEL ONLINE. “The young men can extend their civilian service and civilian service locations will finally have the planning security they need.”

But many see the decision as a weak compromise. Florian Bernschneider, the man responsible for civilian service policy in parliament for the FDP, argues the volunteer provision will result in millions in extra costs for the government, “money that could be used more sensibly elsewhere.” The change still requires the approval of Germany's parliament.

Dwindling Government Support

For institutions that rely on the good, cheap labor provided by the civilian service, each cut to the program is more painful than the last. A growing number of organizations are simply withdrawing from the program.

Take the Red Cross in the central German city of Fulda. At its peak, the organization had some 50 civvies who stayed for 20 months and received professional training as paramedics, which could take up to three months to complete. After several months, civvies could be seen driving ambulances to the scenes of accidents and treating heart attack victims. It was a mutually beneficial relationship -- the emergency workers got needed help and the civvies received valuable job training and could make a career out of it if they wanted. The few civvies still working with the Red Cross in the city today are relegated to more mundane tasks like transporting patients. But even that is expensive for the charity organization: Training civvies just to be emergency helpers with simpler tasks still requires at least two months and costs the Red Cross around €2,400.

Germany's social services organizations are at a loss over how they can continue to deliver the same level of service they have up until now without the generous civvie help. Some are tolling the death bell for civilian service.

Rainer Hub of the German Protestant Church's social services organization Diakonie, told SPIEGEL last year that plans to shorten the service period would be a "death blow" to modern German tradition. He said many organizations that currently place youths from the civilian service would stop doing so. For such a short time commitment, he said, the cost of training would be too great to make it worthwhile.

An alternative to mandatory civilian service has also grown in popularity in recent years. In 2009, some 37,000 Germans served in the so-called voluntary social year program designed for people up to the age of 27. A study commissioned by the German Family Ministry concluded that the only thing curbing growth of the program is the number of placements available -- and that the current figure could triple if sufficient slots are created. For the institutions hosting volunteers, though, the program is costlier than the government's more generously subsidized civilian service program. Institutions are expected to provide room and board, work clothing and around €150 a month in pocket money for the volunteers.

Many social institutions are also turning to other alternatives, using low-paid, part-time workers -- often the long-term unemployed or young or old workers who are part of the full-time labor force -- who are participating in government-sponsored employment schemes.

Novak, C. (2010, May 21). *The Twilight of the Civvies: Germany to Scale Back Mandatory Civilian Service*. Retrieved from Spiegel Online: <http://www.spiegel.de/international>

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2010

All Rights Reserved