

Immigrants may be forced to learn German



Immigrants may be forced to learn German Bill would make language and integration courses mandatory

BY AARON KIRCHFELD

A bill being presented on Friday by Lower Saxony's state government to the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament where the states are represented, would require new immigrants and foreigners receiving welfare and unemployment benefits to attain a certain level of language proficiency or face penalties.

The "integration" law would require immigrants and foreigners already living in Germany who speak "unsatisfactory" German to enroll in language courses. Those refusing to take the language courses would not only face reduced welfare and unemployment benefits but would have a harder time attaining status as permanent residents.

"The language requirements are intended to help immigrants and foreigners integrate into the social and working world," said Michael Lemell, an official in the Lower Saxony Interior Ministry. "And the sanctions can be used to pressure them into taking the course, and therefore help the integration process."

The new integration bill, based on similar laws in the Netherlands, would place the required proficiency at the designated "B1 level," in addition to requiring immigrants to take courses on the basics of the German legal system, culture and history.

"Level B1 is really high, and I am sure that many Germans could not even pass the test," Omid Nouripour, a member of the Green party's national executive, said. "And we also have problems with the sanction methods, since they

target immigrant rights."

Uwe Schünemann, the Lower Saxony interior minister, said he expected backing from other states which, like Lower Saxony, are governed by the Christian Democratic Union. Support should also be forthcoming from Bavaria, which is run by the CDU's sister party, the Christian Social Union.

"The government wants to put its entire immigration package through rather than this separate integration law," said a spokesperson for the Bundesrat, Sandra Michel, referring to the Social Democratic Party-Green coalition government's second attempt at passing the same immigration bill. The original passed the Bundesrat last year, but it was later annulled by the constitutional court on procedural grounds. "Up until now there have not been any real course requirements," said Michel.

Lower Saxony's new proposal would also shift the costs of language courses to new immigrants, excluding refugees and certain asylum seekers. Schünemann claimed

that by passing the costs onto the immigrants, the government would save more than €30 million (\$34 million), to bring expenditures for language courses down to €153 million.

But Nouripour said that "for people with small or no incomes, it seems unfair to make them pay for the courses themselves. And Lower Saxony has not specified how the entire costs, including for foreigners, would be covered."

The CDU, which came to power in Lower Saxony in February, said that classes would total 900 hours, 300 more than the amount the SPD-Green coalition suggested in their immigration law proposals.

Some 78,000 new immigrants and 50,000 foreigners already living in Germany would be required to visit the courses each year, according to the opposition. There are currently an estimated 7.3 million foreigners, about 9 percent of the total population, living in Germany.

Since 1990 alone, 2.3 million ethnic Germans have moved to Germany from the former Soviet Union. Many of them would be required to take the language courses under the proposed bill. Jochen Welt, the government official responsible for these immigrants, called this "ridiculous and hypocritical."

Frankfurt and Stuttgart, the cities with the highest proportion of citizens holding foreign passports, have decided to offer integration and language courses for immigrants since the government's immigration law, which would have set similar requirements, was put on ice.



Uwe Schünemann.