

Student protests at Berlin universities

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5 December 2003

Student protests at Berlin universities are continuing. Students at the city's Technological University (TU) went out on strike four weeks ago and two other Berlin universities, Humboldt University and Free University, have since joined the protest against budgetary and education cuts being pushed through by the Berlin Senate. Other German universities have also begun strike action, including in Frankfurt, Gießen and Hannover, amongst others.

Many different forms of student protest have already been organised. About three weeks ago, the strike at the Technological University began with an occupation of the roundabout at Ernst-Reuter Square, one of the main traffic junctions in Berlin. Lectures and seminars were shifted out of the university and carried out in public places, such as on the city's public transport network—with the aim of drawing public attention to the miserable state of education in Berlin. Each Saturday there are demonstrations in the city centre. On November 27, these demonstrations reached a new peak when more than 20,000 students marched from Potsdamer Square to Berlin City Hall.

On November 25, the offices of the senator for science, Thomas Flierl (PDS—Party of Democratic Socialism), were occupied by protesting students. Attempts by police to evict the protesters were repulsed on two occasions, as hundreds of students gathered for spontaneous demonstrations. The occupation ended peacefully on November 26.

The central offices of the PDS were occupied the same day. The party immediately announced that it would keep the police out of the matter to insure that the occupation ended peacefully and the students were declared to be “guests for an indefinite period of time.” But it would be a mistake to overestimate the significance of this concession by the PDS. Within the Berlin Senate it is the PDS in particular that is behind the cuts in the field of social and educational policies. The fact that it is now acting in a conciliatory manner only reveals its fear of losing whatever popular support it has left.

During the last three weeks, a radicalisation of the protests has been seen. What began with lectures in public and the blockade of streets has developed into occupations of official buildings and party headquarters. However, the orientation of the protests and the political understanding underlying the actions stand in stark contrast to the radicalisation itself. There is little evidence of any genuine analysis of the policies of the

Senate.

The protests were sparked by the announcement by the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and PDS that they are planning to carry out massive cuts in university funding. Initially funding is to be reduced by 50 million euros in the years 2004 and 2005. The annual funding of universities is to be cut by 75 million euros by 2009. The consequences for universities are plain to see: cutbacks in professorships and employees, less places in colleges and the closing of institutes.

For instance 250 of 1,082 professorships in Berlin are to be axed. Three of the eight faculties at the TU would then have to close. At Humboldt University, nearly 500 employees of the faculties, indispensable for the education of the students, would lose their jobs. The institute for medieval history at the FU is to cut 7 of its 16 chairs. Bearing in mind that all students of history have compulsory lectures at this institute and must write thesis papers, the question arises of how it will be possible to study history at all.

University libraries, which are an absolute necessity for each course of study, will be especially affected. In libraries, employees and funding will be equally affected by the massive cuts.

The situation in Berlin is already catastrophic. No proper education can now take place because of overcrowded lecture rooms and seminars. For a long time there have been insufficient seminars for all students. The newly-planned cuts would be a literal death blow for some study courses.

On top of the cuts the Senate is also planning to introduce tuition fees. These fees have provoked the broadest resistance among students. The plan to raise tuition fees is especially deplorable because 10 million euros from these planned fees are already included in the budget for 2005. This money is not to be used for the universities but to revitalise the regional budget.

The so-called “study accounts” under consideration are a badly concealed form of tuition fees. A certain number of seminars, periods of practical training and semesters are to be free, but if the time in which a student is to complete his studies is exceeded or if he has to repeat a course, he will have to pay.

The time in which a student has to complete his studies is already estimated to be too short for several reasons: a completion of studies “on schedule” is hardly possible, especially for students who have to finance their studies with

part-time jobs. The cuts affecting professorships and funds will make participation in compulsory courses even more difficult for the majority of students—seminars are overfilled, and places in seminars are already being distributed according to long waiting lists.

In general, the “study accounts”—which can be whittled down without catching the public’s attention—are just a backdoor means of introducing tuition fees.

If one looks at these developments from a broader perspective, it is apparent that what is taking place in Berlin and the whole of Germany is nothing less than the destruction of public education. This is a general development, which begins in the nurseries and ends with the universities.

The ruinous education policies of the Berlin Senate do not affect only the universities. A year ago the decision was passed to privatize half of all nurseries. This included plans to axe the jobs of 1,100 nursery school teachers. The nursery group size is to be increased from 16 to 21 children per teacher. For low-income families it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain proper education now that they have to pay for their children’s teaching materials. This means that families pay 100 euros for each child every year.

Schools in Germany are in permanent crisis because many cities are bankrupt—a result of the elimination of corporate taxes by the SPD-Green government. In the past corporate taxation was one of the most important sources of income for local authority districts.

In many federal states courses of study are being divided into bachelor and master studies. Bachelor studies basically correspond to what was up until now referred to as basic studies (four semesters), and are to remain cost free. But a student who wants to complete an entire course of studies must take a masters degree, for which tuition fees will be raised. This means the creation of an educated elite comprising only those who can afford the fees. The vast majority of the population will have no access to a decent, well-rounded education.

The introduction of tuition fees leads to the same result, but in a different form. Study accounts and tuition fees means that university education will become a privilege for those who can afford it.

The new educational policies are only one component of the social attacks being carried out in Berlin and throughout Germany. The government’s Agenda 2010 and the implementation of the so-called “Hartz-concept” by the SPD-Green coalition far exceed anything planned by its Conservative-Liberal predecessors. In a very short period the Berlin Senate, headed by SPD and PDS, has systematically begun to dismantle the welfare state. That this government in particular has taken up the role of spearhead of the destruction of public education is of particular note.

At the end of the 19th century, as the SPD emerged as the mass party of the German working class, it attached great importance to cultural and educational questions. The raising of

the cultural and political consciousness of workers was regarded as a necessary prerequisite for their emancipation and was therefore a central task of German Social Democracy. The SPD published books, papers and magazines that enjoyed a high circulation. The SPD also established public libraries and organised many courses on politics, history and science. The demand that the working class have free access to good education was a central component and cornerstone of the social democratic programme.

In the 1970s the social democratic government headed by Willy Brandt continued to implement educational reforms that were explicitly aimed at increasing the number of working class children at universities. Some progress in this direction actually did take place following the establishment of a new kind of school, the so-called “Gesamtschule,” and the introduction of student grants. The number of working class children passing university entrance qualifications and completing university studies rose significantly, although never to a level representing their representation in the population as a whole.

This tendency has been declining for a number of years now. The SPD and PDS are contributing to the destruction of the public education system and are demanding education for the elite and not for the masses. With the current plans for cuts, the Berlin Senate is once again spearheading this development.

The policies of the Berlin Senate are part of an international phenomenon. In 1994, the World Trade Organisation passed the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), obliging its members, which include all the members of the European Union, to open their public service sector to the free market and competition. With regard to educational policies, this means that state-owned educational institutions like universities and schools will either no longer be sponsored or that all equivalent private institutions must receive the same subsidies.



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