

Berlin: 40,000 demonstrate to defend education and social programs

Our correspondents
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Student protests, which have been taking place for a number of weeks in Germany, reached a high point Saturday with the biggest demonstration so far by an estimated 40,000 students in Berlin (organisers put the crowd at 50,000). In addition to students from Berlin's three main universities, the protest was joined for the first time by representatives of other welfare activist groups and trade unions. In the event, the participation of the trade unions was very limited.

The Berlin demonstration was held under the slogan "Against the dismantling of education and the theft of the welfare state," with students and other protesters travelling from cities and towns in the adjoining states of Brandenburg, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein. Many placards and banners warned of the dangers of an education system aimed at encouraging an educational elite and called for a redistribution of income to benefit the socially disadvantaged.

The protest in Berlin corresponded with other demonstrations throughout Germany and Europe. In Frankfurt am Main, 10,000 participated in demonstrations Saturday; in the East German city of Leipzig, over 20,000 took part. The extent of the demonstrations Saturday made clear that what had begun as a local protest in Berlin has now grown into a national movement for the defence of the right to education. Protests against attacks on education also took place in other European countries, notably France and Italy.

Berlin has witnessed a radicalisation of student protests over the past weeks with a series of occupations of the offices of political parties—in particular the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), which together constitute the Berlin coalition government. Last week, students also occupied the Berlin offices of the giant Bertelsmann publishing company after members of the firm's executive had expressed their

sympathy with some of the education policies favoured by the Berlin Senate.

The aim of Saturday's demonstration was to bring together students with other social layers that are affected by spending cuts—school students, families and the unemployed. Statistics demonstrate that sympathy with the students is high. According to one recent opinion poll, 83 percent of the population in Berlin approved of protest action to defend public education.

The main segment of the demonstration set off from the city's Brandenburg Gate, where initially just 5,000 had gathered. As the demonstration arrived at the central meeting place, it had swelled to over 40,000. The trade union section of the march, which assembled at Potsdam Square, consisted of only a few hundred. The low level of attendance at the demonstration was in line with the policy of German trade unions to halt and sabotage any effective protest action against the national government's programme of social cuts—the so-called "Agenda 2010."

A member of the IG Bau miners union attending the Berlin demonstration told the WSWs that apart from a few unemployed persons, there was virtually no effort made to secure a proper attendance by trade unionists. He asserted that this was bound up with the current collaboration between the government and trade unions, which are eager to participate in joint discussions over the proposed cuts.

A number of speakers from various organisations that had issued calls for the demonstration addressed the final rally at the Alexanderplatz. All of the speakers emphasised the necessity of uniting students with other social layers affected by welfare cuts, but refrained from offering any other broader perspective to defend educational gains, many of which were first introduced in the 1970s. The spokesman for the teachers and lecturers union (GEW) sought to adopt the same language used by the Berlin Senate to justify its cuts. The GEW speaker

complained that politicians were not doing enough to invest in Germany's future and secure the country's position as a leading economic power.

The speaker treated the actions undertaken by politicians in Berlin and nationwide as a mistake arising from policies that were unreasonable and not properly thought through. He carefully ignored the fact that the shift towards higher education for a small privileged elite, with the majority of the population condemned to a basic schooling, is entirely in line with the demands of big business. Based on the prognosis that those in power were being unreasonable, the speaker justified what amounts to a thoroughly harmless and ineffective perspective—increased pressure on establishment politicians to make them more reasonable.

Official speakers at the rally expressed considerable confidence in being able to win the ear of politicians and celebrated as a success the fact that the Berlin senator for scientific affairs, Thomas Flierl (PDS), had promised at a recent conference of his party to reconsider the introduction of so-called study accounts. Speakers also expressed the hope that the SPD would come to its senses. However, demonstrators themselves were more sceptical and few were convinced that it would be possible to sway the Senate.

In an interview with the WSWs, Anika, 22, a student of linguistics at the Free University, said: "The protest will not change anything. The politicians are just playing for time." She nevertheless saw the necessity to take part in the demonstrations: "The protest should make clear to the public the extent of the cuts being carried out in the universities. Existing conditions are already catastrophic." She said she was disappointed by the Berlin Senate. "I think many students voted for Wowereit (Berlin mayor, SPD) and now feel let down. As for the PDS, I did not expect anything from them in the first place."

Jakob, 22, expressed a similar negative view of the Berlin council: "One can only shake one's head over the PDS." Jakob studies at the city's Technical University and fears a worsening of conditions. "At the moment it is not too bad, but where will it all end?" Jakob articulated his anger at the form taken by spending cuts: "Cuts are being made at the wrong end. The politicians have money to spend when it comes to bailing out a bank or raising incomes for top-flight earners, but in the meantime education is suffering more and more. One has to demonstrate that the majority of the electorate is against the cuts. It is not just an issue for Berlin, but for the country as a whole."

Werner, an author and director, also took part in the Berlin protest. "The demonstration is important because it is necessary to make clear the extent of the problem," he said. "I have no illusion that the Senate will reverse its course. They will only press ahead with similar policies. It is a national government that is intent on pursuing a free-market political course and demonstrating that it is finally a force to be reckoned with in the world by sending its military around the globe. It represents a very dangerous lurch to the right. The savings made in education are then swallowed up by increased financing of armaments."

"What is taking place here is an abomination!" declared André, who is studying at the Humboldt University. "I have followed the discussion in the senate and what has taken place is just electoral manoeuvring." André was also critical of the Green Party, which is currently excluded from the Berlin coalition. "They are responsible for introducing study accounts in other German states." He also saw the roots of the attack on education in the government's free-market course: "There is a huge amount of privatisation talking place and concessions made to the employers. For such policies, the government needs money and so they undertake an offensive against those reckoned to be unable to defend themselves"—workers, students, etc.

Members and supporters of the WSWs distributed over a thousand leaflets at the demonstration and set up a literature table. The leaflet called for attendance at a meeting at the Humboldt University on December 18, titled "Education is a fundamental right—not a commodity."



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