

SEP statement to Berlin demonstration

Germany: education is a fundamental right—not a commodity

15 December 2003

The following is the text of the statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party (Germany) and distributed by supporters at Saturday's demonstration in Berlin protesting cuts in education and social programs. [See "Berlin: 40,000 demonstrate to defend education and social programs"]

The right to education is the latest social gain to be put to the knife in Germany. This is called "education reform," although like the so-called welfare reforms, pensions reforms and health reforms it is anything but. It works like this: First the untenable conditions at dilapidated and overcrowded universities are made intolerable by massive cuts in provisions and staff, the patient is tortured until even he or she regards amputation as beneficial, and then the "reforms" are implemented.

There is a large degree of unity concerning the goal, no matter whether the proposals come from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the Greens, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) or the Free Democrats (FDP). At most, the arguments are about nuances, but not about the direction policy should take. The old system, oriented towards humanitarian ideals of education, is to be so thoroughly transformed—starting in the kindergarten and proceeding right up to the universities—that nothing is left.

Mere training should take the place of all-round education, producing the narrow specialists needed by big business. Private elite academies will replace public universities. Only the few who can afford it will be able to complete their studies and conduct research, while those who have neither rich parents nor the necessary connections complete high-speed courses at mediocre mass universities.

Universities and schools are being subjected to cost-benefit analysis; education becomes a function of the size of one's wallet. Anything that yields no measurable benefit and profit in the short term falls victim to the red pencil. Alexander von Humboldt, who founded Berlin's most prestigious university, to provide students with an all-round humanist education, must give way to Adam Smith and Bill Gates. Others are left to worry about the long-term consequences for individuals and society.

The SPD, PDS and Greens are the champions of this "reform." The CDU/CSU and FDP rub their hands and follow their lead.

The SPD-PDS city legislature in the Berlin Senate is cutting 75 million euros (\$92 million) from the capital's three universities. Nearly a quarter of all professorships, up to 500 other university

employees and several faculties will fall victim to this measure. Responsibility for implementing the cuts lies with Senator Thomas Flierl, a member of the Party of Democratic Socialism. Meanwhile, in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, his Social Democratic colleague Hannelore Kraft announced her "University 2010 Plan," saying what was needed was "more competition, more excellence, more individual responsibility." With so much enthusiasm for the free market, the conservative CDU/CSU and liberal FDP opposition becomes superfluous.

Under these circumstances, the so-called "education debate" is a sham. It passes completely over the heads of those directly concerned, who have to deal with the effects of the cuts and personnel shortages in the kindergartens, schools and universities. Well-rewarded commissions, consisting of education experts, pedagogues and psychologists, prepare high-blown proposals that in practice boil down to cuts, closures and privatisation.

For them, no proposal is too absurd to be thrown into the debate: Begin schooling at age four (which "saves" kindergarten places), reduce schooling to 12 years, schools should be "independent" and take "responsibility" for themselves (which in the long term means privatisation), reduce the average period of study to four or six semesters, introduce student accounts and fees, promote competition between universities, which should be allowed to select their own students, financing by private sponsors, etc.

The future result of such an economically efficient and cost-effective education system can easily be imagined: A 20-year-old, who began school at 4, entered university at 16 and graduates at 19, only then to spend a life slaving away in "flexible" jobs for the elite, before drawing a meagre pension at 67 (or will it then be 70?).

A further reason for the offensive against the state education system lies in the role of education as an economic factor. Today, education is subjected to the global market as a commodity.

In the course of establishing the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in April 1994, the member states signed the "General Agreement on Trade in Services" (GATS). This envisages a liberalisation of the international trade in services, which in principle also applies to education. Free competition is to be made possible, either by abolishing state financing or by treating each private education provider in the same way.

Individual countries can commit themselves to specific areas of

the agreement. But in view of the tremendous sums involved in this sector, the pressure exerted by the transnational corporations is accordingly great. The worldwide cost of education has been estimated by UNESCO at over \$2 trillion per year.

The European Union has signed up to GATS. In 1999 in Bologna, education ministers from 29 European states agreed to establish a “level playing field” for universities and to restructure national provisions by 2010 according to the US model, into courses leading to bachelor’s and master’s degrees. At present, 1,600 courses have already been moved over to this system. Students are able to gain their bachelor’s after just four semesters. At this point, following a largely practically oriented study, most are expected to move directly into work. Only a small fraction will be able to continue at university, with greater emphasis on academic study, and achieve a master’s degree.

This makes selection dependent on what is financially viable or can provide business with a service. In this way, the law guaranteeing university education allegedly free of charge would only apply to those studying for their bachelor’s. Those wanting to pursue their studies further would have to raise substantial finances. Only the best in class would be accepted for their master’s. The cuts being introduced are preparing for such a selection. Already many universities are severely limiting the courses they offer at master’s level for financial reasons. Moreover, each cutback in the range of subjects available prepares the way for the privatisation and commercialisation of education.

Over the past weeks, school pupils and college students have protested in dozens of European and German cities against the cuts and plans for education “reform.” This is to be welcomed. However, it would be an illusion to believe that those in government will accede to this pressure. Even where politicians express understanding and sympathy for the protests, they are not ready to withdraw the cuts. They even hope to be able to use students’ increasing frustration to push through their own reactionary plans.

Most Western governments reacted to the student protests in the 1960s with comprehensive education reforms. The education system was restructured, the universities opened up for broader sections of the population, and large sums invested in education. In Germany, for example, expenditure on education doubled between 1970 and 1975. While in 1974 only one in six completed high school, in the 1990s it was one in three. Moreover, the introduction of the student financial assistance scheme made it possible for children with lower-paid parents to study at university. In England, comprehensive schools were introduced and secured financially. In Scandinavia, the “Folkeskole” concept (municipal primary and lower secondary schools) was further developed and compulsory schooling extended.

These changes were closely linked to the other social reforms of the time. A high-quality and free education for the broad masses was a central demand of the workers’ movement and later also of the student movement. A high degree of political and cultural consciousness was considered the basis for workers intervening into social events. In this sense, the earlier education reforms must be understood as a social concession to the working class. The relative post-war boom formed the economic basis for this within

the national framework.

However, the trend has been declining for years, and alongside immense cuts we are experiencing one counter-reform after another, which aim at orienting education towards a narrow elite. Like the cuts in welfare benefits, Britain’s Margaret Thatcher also pioneered this development. In the 1980s, the Thatcher government ruined the state education sector and established a two-class system, with badly financed state schools on the one side, and privately funded schools on the other.

In the meantime, this has spread throughout all European states. In Berlin, for example, since reunification, nearly a third of all professorships have been cut. In most of the German states, the education cuts in the universities are now being cut to the bone. The provision of free teaching materials is the exception, and schools lack the most basic equipment. Under these circumstances, there will be no revival of the 1970s education reforms.

It is an irony of history that most of the members of today’s government—including the chancellor and the vice-chancellor—owe their social ascent to the education reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. But economic facts are stronger than subjective motives and intents. The worldwide crisis of the capitalist system has undermined the policy of social concessions. Under the pressure of the global financial markets and merciless international competition, social democracy is no longer able to dampen social contradictions by means of social reforms. It now defends the bourgeois order at the expense of past reforms.

In particular, the war against Iraq shows how advanced is the worldwide crisis of the capitalist system. To defend American hegemony and divert attention from the social tensions inside the US, the Bush administration has resorted to the classic means of wars of imperialist conquest, and threatens to plunge the entire world into chaos and war. The German and the European governments react by rattling their sabres and declaring war on their own populations.

Under these circumstances, the defence of the right to education is inseparably bound up with the fight against the capitalist social order. Appeals to the ruling elite are not enough. What is necessary is the building of a political movement that fights for the redistribution of corporate wealth and the reorganisation of economic life in the interest of the majority of the population. This calls for the construction of a new working class party on the basis of an international, socialist programme.



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