

Germany: Ten thousand demonstrate against university fees

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On June 29, ten thousand university students, teachers, school pupils and parents from throughout the German state of Hesse demonstrated in Wiesbaden against plans by the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) state administration to introduce a general study fee of 500 euros per term. A limit of up to 1,500 euros per term is envisaged for graduate courses and foreign students from European Union countries. The law is to be introduced in the state parliament in July.

The demonstration in Wiesbaden was part of a nationwide day of action against such university fees. On the same day, 3,500 students protested in Hamburg against the CDU-led town council, which also decided to introduce study fees of 500 euros per term.

So far, the CDU-governed states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony have either introduced or decided upon study fees.

The day of action in Wiesbaden was the high point of a nearly two-month campaign by students at all Hessian universities. The campaign began following the decision by the state government to introduce study fees on May 5, although the state's constitution guarantees a free school and university education.

Since then, mass meetings of thousands of students and a wide range of protest actions have taken place on nearly a daily basis all over Hesse: in Marburg, the university administration offices were occupied for several days, while motorways, tram lines and major junctions were blocked in Marburg and Frankfurt.

Hessian Science Minister Udo Corts declared the imposition of fees for students to be "reasonable" because the new legislation allows students to take out study loans, which do not have to be repaid until studies have been completed.

The use of loans was also cited by the Hessian state government as a legal excuse for bypassing the requirements laid down by the state constitution. The state authority ordered a noted Berlin attorney to examine the legal aspects of the legislation. The SPD (Social Democratic Party)

Education spokesman, Michael Siebel, defended the procedure, saying it led to "an ordered result."

The German Student Council rejected such claims, concluding the fees would make it "increasingly more expensive and difficult" to study in Germany. More than a quarter of all students survive on less than 600 euros per month, explained Hans Dieter Rinkens, the president of the Student Council. "Therefore, for the majority of students an additional 500 euros is anything but peanuts."

On the Wiesbaden demonstration many banners and posters proclaimed that education was a basic right. One banner read: "Against Study Fees—For Education as a Basic Human Right." Another said: "Seeking Rich Foster Parents," while yet another depicted the state prime minister, Roland Koch, and said: "Hangman in the Land of Poets and Philosophers."

The main speaker on the demonstration, the chair of the student union at the University of Giessen, Umut Sönmez, described the plans of the state government as a "great challenge" which had to be answered accordingly. He accused the state government and Prime Minister Koch of sabotaging equal opportunity in education and called for a struggle against the entire political course of the government. "That is why we cannot merely prevent the study fees, no, we must expand equal opportunity."

Experiences with similar student fees in Austria showed that course admissions immediately fell by 15 percent, with proportionally fewer applications from financially less well off families.

Sönmez rejected the argument of proponents of student fees who claim the revenues would benefit the universities and thus help students with improved conditions. This is perhaps the case in the short term, he said, but in the long term the dire condition of state budgets will of necessity ensure that public financing will decline even further.

According to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, examples from other countries make clear that the introduction of student fees only improves the financial situation of universities in the short term. On a long-term basis, the introduction of such

fees sets the course for a decisive turn away from national in favour of private financing.

Although official political circles claim that a good education is the key to future development, the figures from the federal Statistics Office show that official state financing of education has been declining since 2002.

On June 22, in the dead of night, Hessian police carried out a major provocation against the student protests. At the beginning of the protests the police had remained relatively restrained. With the beginning of the World Cup games, however, the police sought to intimidate the protest movement. The Frankfurt chief of the police openly threatened to treat protesters as criminals.

Following renewed demonstrations on June 21, two full squads of police violently dispersed a solidarity party being held on the campus of Frankfurt University. They detained 47 persons, including the doorman of the student centre, bound them with plastic cable, kept them for ten hours and took all of their belongings.

As a pretext for the action, the police claimed that two window panes of a nearby bookshop and travel agency had been broken.

Police first gave Student Union Chairman Amin Benaissa just five minutes to break up the party, and then moved in with force while he was in the process of talking to students. The police were not interested in a peaceful solution, Benaissa said. He regarded the police action as a “deliberate attack on the movement” and as a “provocation.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of students attending the demonstration in Wiesbaden:

Andreas is studying sociology in Mainz and lives in Frankfurt. He said, “I got wind of the protests in Frankfurt last week. I must say, the way in which so-called security precautions have been tightened up more repressively around the soccer world championship with threats from the police, and then finally the storming of the Café in the student centre in Frankfurt, is, in my view, unworthy of the democracy which we supposedly have.

“This no longer has anything to do with maintaining any basic social consensus. When I see the way in which student fees are being imposed in Hesse in defiance of the constitution, when I see how fundamental rights such as the right to demonstrate are being trampled underfoot by the chief of police and Interior Minister, then I wonder who is undermining the basic social consensus. It is not the students, but rather the state government and the chief of police. That annoys me very much, I must say. It is simply presumed that the students are the baddies who are up to evil. In reality, it is the other way round.”

Hannes studies journalism, education and sport in Leipzig. He said, “We came to the protest with a group of approximately 60 from Leipzig. We are demonstrating for free education and a halt to the student fees.

“Leipzig students want to express their solidarity with those other students who are momentarily affected or threatened by student fees. We decided to go another step further and not only indicate our symbolic solidarity but also actively participate in the protests.

“It is entirely predictable: should fees be imposed in neighbouring states then the pressure grows on the government in Saxony to do the same. We are therefore dependent on linking together the protests by students across the country.

“There are undoubted similarities with the situation in France regarding the forms of protest and organization. In principle, it is structured in France in such a way as to make rapid, spontaneous protest possible. The wave has washed over—that is clear—to North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse. Substantial protests developed there, but it has been relatively difficult to mobilise on a national level. Therefore I hope that demos planned in Wiesbaden and Hamburg will be a success, and from that perspective the demo on July 6 in Frankfurt is a major success.”

Konstantin studies sociology in Mainz. He told the WSWs: “We have just run over one of the main bridges straddling the Main. I was held by policemen who asked for my particulars. Just because I had a megaphone in the hand, I was regarded as a ringleader.

“I had my mobile phone in my hand and it was taken away from me on the grounds that the police have the right to protect themselves from being photographed. After they failed to find any photos they had to apologize and return my mobile phone. I think the security forces are very, very nervous. They are afraid and uncertain.

“We hope the police remain calm today. We are peaceful students and simply want to ensure that we do not have to pay for our studies and education. Those are our demands. That is why we are here today and making use of our basic right to demonstrate. We cannot understand why such unbelievable harshness is necessary for peaceful demonstrators.”



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