

Antiwar vigil in Berlin against Israeli aggression

Our correspondent
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Last Friday evening the Palestinian community and other Arab organizations in Berlin called a vigil in the centre of West Berlin attended by over 500 people to protest the Israeli assault on Lebanon.

Moments of silence were held in the course of the protest and candles were lit to commemorate the many civilian victims of the Israeli bombardment and invasion of southern Lebanon and Gaza. Intended as a vigil, the protest had more the character of a demonstration due to the number of participants.

At the beginning of the vigil the organizers read out the extensive restrictions and bans on political activity which have been demanded by the local and police authorities. Arab organizations were prevented from carrying out a demonstration on Saturday in the German capital, and restrictions imposed by the police for the Friday protest included the banning of any symbols associated with, or indicating sympathy for, the Hezbollah movement or photos of its leading members—this although Hezbollah is not a prohibited organization in Germany. In addition, protesters were banned from displaying any propaganda or placards that could be interpreted by the police as “calling into question the right of existence of the Israeli state.”

At a mass demonstration a week earlier some participants had waved Hezbollah flags, displayed portraits of the Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and shouted slogans of support. Immediately after the demonstration a campaign was initiated by leading politicians in Berlin and supported by broad layers of the press to criminalize and demonize the Hezbollah movement, which has won broad sympathy from layers of the Arab masses due to its resistance to the Israeli invasion.

The leading Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician in Berlin, Friedbert Pflüger, denounced those

who supported the demonstration against Israeli war crimes as “preachers of hate” and “supporters of terror.” Pflüger was then immediately backed by Berlin Interior Senator Ehrhard Körting (Social Democratic Party, SPD). Körting’s department immediately declared its intent to conduct a criminal investigation into the activities of the demonstrators. Körting also denounced refugees from southern Lebanon forced to flee Israeli bombs and rockets as “potential Hezbollah terrorists,” whom he would refused to allow into Berlin.

In fact, the investigation launched by Körting yielded no results. Unable to proceed against demonstrators and organizers of the antiwar protests, Körting instead forbade any demonstration of sympathy for Hezbollah, which he equated with being equivalent to “the demand for the destruction of the state of Israel.” Police were in close attendance at the vigil and evidently prepared to move against the demonstration should any pretext have arisen.

Most of the participants at Friday’s vigil came from throughout the Arab world, in particular from Lebanon and Palestine. In many cases entire families, including children, joined the protest. German sympathizers were also in attendance as well as a group of US citizens who expressed their solidarity.

Protesters carried shocking photos of the damage done in southern Lebanon and horrific pictures of the dead and injured. A third of all victims of the Israeli bombardments are young children. Speeches to the demonstration pointed out that what was at stake in the fighting was the existence of Lebanon as an independent entity. Having initially concentrated its violence on the predominantly Shiite communities in southern Lebanon, the Israeli air force has recently been increasingly bombarding suburbs of Beirut and

other areas inhabited mainly by Sunni and Christian communities.

While anger and anguish over the Israeli massacres was widespread, participants at the vigil remained disciplined and peaceful, intent on communicating their concerns to the public at large. Brief reports of the vigil in German newspapers noted that the demonstrators had abided by the restrictions laid down by the police and the bans on political propaganda stipulated by Senator Körting. Journalists were evidently unable to find any basis for the kind of witch-hunting campaign against protesters that they had carried out the previous week.

The protest was striking for the fact that none of Germany's leading political parties were in attendance, including parties associated with the political left. Neither the Left Party—Party of Democratic Socialism, which sits in coalition with Körting in the Berlin Senate, nor the Election Alternative group (WASG)—which is standing its own independent candidates in Berlin in elections in September, although nationally seeking to fuse with the Left Party—took part in the protest in any shape or form.

Members of the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) spoke with many demonstrators who expressed their dismay over the unwillingness of European governments to undertake any action against the criminal activity of Israel, which was being firmly backed by the US. In particular, younger demonstrators were very interested to discuss with the PSG members on an international socialist perspective.

The PSG members distributed copies of the statement by the US Socialist Equality Party “What way forward in the struggle against war?” which were warmly received by many protesters. Christoph Vandreier, PSG candidate for the Berlin state elections in September, then addressed the rally by microphone and expressed the solidarity of the PSG with those taking part in the protest against Israeli-US aggression. Vandrier quoted extensively from the SEP statement and received substantial applause from the gathering when he cited from the end of the statement:

“If the tragedies that befell humanity in the 1930s—global war and fascism—are not to be repeated on an even more horrific scale, the working class must advance its own alternative. It is not enough to feel

revulsion for the killing that is being carried out every day in Iraq and Lebanon and the lies that are told to justify it. Neither is it enough to protest these crimes. A new political force must be created that can put a stop to them.

“This can be accomplished only through the building of new political movement of the working class, independent of the existing big business parties and based on the perspective of uniting working people internationally—including the Arab and Jewish workers of the Middle East—in a common struggle for the socialist transformation of society.”



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