

Dresden: Over 10,000 students rally against new state education law

Our correspondents
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On December 13, more than 10,000 students demonstrated in the German city of Dresden against a new education law planned by the state of Saxony. The state government is a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) led by Prime Minister Georg Milbradt of the CDU.

Demonstrators arrived in Dresden in special trains from many of the country's main university cities. The protest was directed in particular against changes in the existing regulations that currently permit some student participation in university decisions. According to the new law, the rector of a university will have greatly expanded powers and more autonomy. This will both disempower existing committees and also lead to increasing competition between universities.

In future, university rectors could use their new powers to withdraw from existing labour agreements in order to employ new staff at vastly reduced wages. This process of growing autonomy for the universities also increases the likelihood of the introduction of tuition fees in the foreseeable future. The new law would also have broad repercussions for the existing university structures and result in a much-reduced role for students in university senates.

The potential consequences of such measures become clear when one examines the new role proposed for the university council. This body is to be awarded increased authority in the organisation of local universities, with fifty percent of the board members to be drawn from fields outside of education—i.e., figures involved in business or culture, who will be appointed and not elected.

Even before last Thursday's demonstration, the main organisers—the public service union, Verdi, the Teachers' Union (GEW) and the Conference of Saxony Student groups (KSS)—were anxious to ensure that discussion at the demonstration was limited to the issue of student

participation in university structures, rather than addressing broader social and political questions. In various leaflets, there was some mention of the "marketing of education," but only in relation to specific aspects of the functioning of university committees, student councils and so forth.

Many of those taking part in the demonstration were motivated by much more fundamental concerns.

Rikard, a 26-year-old geography student from Dresden, said that the exact formulations of the law left him cold. He was taking part in the demonstration because each day he noticed the consequences of the increasing subordination of education to the direct interests of big business and the economy. Student participation was under attack because companies wanted to exert increased influence on the content of university courses. "This is taking place in all fields, however, and is not limited to the issue of participation."

In fact, the conditions for study in Germany have rapidly changed in past years. The introduction of Masters and Bachelor courses at almost all universities, together with the so-called "Excellence" programme introduced by the German government and cuts in the field of education, have already led to a marked orientation in favour of free market interests. The aim is to increase competitiveness of Germany internationally and be able to export education in the form of a commodity.

Christian, a 22-year-old student of civil engineering from Dresden, noted another important link: "I am demonstrating here not only for democracy at the university, but for democracy in general. Everywhere, democratic rights are under attack through increased surveillance measures. The aim is to turn us all into 'glass' people, who can quickly be identified and controlled. We must defend participation at the university now to ensure that we are in a favourable position when it comes to other struggles, for example, over tuition fees."

The Greens and the Left Party sought to place themselves at the head of the protest. Out in front was the so-called “Leftmobile,” which blasted out loud music interspersed with banal slogans. Both parties had sent their speakers on education issues to address the rally, but they had little to say. As they stepped up onto the stage, they were met with restrained applause and some booing.

Even more hostile was the reception for the minister of education and culture in Saxony, Eva Maria Stange (SPD). She is responsible for the new law and took the stage in order to insult the assembled students arrogantly. “Most of you here do not even know what is in the law,” she complained and then, following catcalls from the audience, continued: “It makes no sense to try and discuss the law properly with you.” She had absolutely nothing to offer in the form of a rational argument.

Other speakers, such as Nathalie Meyer from the University of Gießen, raised the significance of the increasing privatisation of education and its relation to growing social polarisation and concluded that one could not place any trust in the established political parties. However, none of the speakers criticised either the Left Party or the Greens, although when in power, the two parties have actively supported cuts in education and social programmes. In Saxony, these parties are in opposition, but one KSS speaker at the rally claimed that a coalition of these “left” parties in government could help resolve the problems facing students.

The only speaker at the rally to address the role of the Left Party and the Greens was Marius Heuser, speaking on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*. He said, “Students are not just faced with an attack on participation, but confront the process of the increasing subordination of the entire education sector to business and economic interests. We are demonstrating here not only against Milbradt and not only against the abolition of student participation, but against the entire European Union Bologna process [the effort to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010], which aims to transform the fundamental right to education into a commodity.”

After long applause, he continued: “Naturally, the subordination of education to the profit interests of a tiny layer is directly linked with the subordination of every individual aspect of social life to the logic of the free market—whether this be the issue of social polarisation, militarism and rearmament, or the restriction of basic democratic rights. If we are clear about this, however, then we must also consider how this development can be opposed.

“In this connection, I would like to address the participation of the trade unions, the Greens and the Left Party at this demonstration. I regard it as nothing less than a disgrace that they should try and monopolise the head of the demonstration. They are not on our side. With regard to the issue of participation: although students had struck for an entire term, carrying out demonstrations and protests as part of a broad mobilisation in Berlin, the Left Party together with SPD implemented cuts of 75 million euros in that city’s universities.

“As you can imagine, the greatest cuts took place in the sphere of the humanities. Under conditions where universities face a permanent shortage of funds, they are forced to supplement their budgets through sponsorship from big business, while making the inevitable cuts to teaching staff and educational materials. In Berlin, the Left Party is responsible for a wide range of cuts in the spheres of education and welfare.

“A movement against cuts in education and social gains together with attacks on democratic rights can only be developed against these parties and organisations. In light of the enormous increase in social tensions, militarism and war, such a movement must undertake to challenge the subordination of social life to the profit system and adopt a socialist and international perspective.

“The construction of such an international movement is the aim of the *World Socialist Web Site*. A first step is the building of the International Students for Social Equality as an international student federation.”

Following his speech, which was frequently interrupted by applause, many students came to the WSWs literature table to leave their e-mail addresses and receive details of forthcoming meetings of the ISSE.



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