

# Berlin education senator and police criminalise student demonstration

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On November 12, students demonstrated across Germany against cuts in the state education system. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, a deliberate smear campaign has been launched by politicians and the media to discredit students who had taken part in protests in the capital city of Berlin.



Occupation of the entry hall of Humboldt University on November 12

In the course of the demonstration in Berlin, around 1,000 students left the protest march and spontaneously occupied the entry hall of Humboldt University for nearly 30 minutes. Angry students stormed into a conference hall where a meeting of managers was taking place, and forced the managers to hold up protest banners. In the general confusion and heated atmosphere, property belonging to the university was damaged, including display boards that were part of an exhibition dealing with the banishment of Jewish businessmen during the Nazi Third Reich.

While German police are very often reluctant to identify provocations from the extreme right as racist or anti-Semitic, in this case they immediately determined that the damage was inflicted on the exhibition by the "strike scatterbrains" (*Bild*) with anti-Semitic backgrounds.

On the same day, Peter-Michael Haeberer, head of the regional police bureau, told the right-wing *Bild* tabloid: "We can assume the exhibition was targeted for anti-Semitic reasons." The paper led with the headline "Berlin's educational senator is certain: It was anti-Semitism!" followed by the announcement by the city's educational senator, Jürgen Zöllner

(SPD/Social Democrats), that the perpetrators would face "the full force of the law." The *Berliner Morgenpost* also asserted that the disruption at Humboldt University was motivated by anti-Semitism.

According to Christoph Marksches, president of Humboldt University, the "anti-Semitic act" was demonstrated by anti-Israeli slogans overheard by the university staff. The damages inflicted on the exhibition were an "unbearable attack on the free order," he said. Kristina Köhler (CDU/Christian Democrats), member of the federal parliament, also felt obliged to comment on the incident: "The damages are no coincidence. Anti-Semitism from the left is still anti-Semitism."

The damages inflicted on the exhibition are regrettable and have absolutely no progressive content. However, any considered evaluation of the facts makes clear that the damage inflicted had nothing to do with anti-Semitism.

An open letter written by the students' alliance, "Bildungsblokaden einreißen" ("Tear down educational blockades"), regretted the incident, offered help with reconstruction of the exhibition and at the same time repudiated the accusations of anti-Semitism. Lee Hielscher of the alliance explained to the press: "Of course, everything can get damaged if such a big crowd storms a building. This wasn't anti-Semitic. Some people just gave free rein to their frustration about the education system."

In its report, *Spiegel Online* referred to the presence of 13-year-old students and quoted one witness: "I do not believe those people knew what they're were destroying.... They just had destruction on their mind."

The campaign against the student demonstration is a deliberate attempt to divert attention from the legitimate anger over the appalling state of education in Berlin. It aims to cast suspicion on the student movement and discredit it in the eyes of the public, while at the same time trying to criminalise its participants.

Students are frustrated because their protests have been ignored for years by the SPD-Left Party Senate. A spokeswoman for the demonstration got to the point: "The politicians know the solutions to all our problems, but they're still not willing to take the least step in the right direction."

Nikilas Wuchenauer of the regional student council criticised

the nationwide education summit organised by Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU/Christian Democrats) for spouting empty words while ignoring the demands of the students.

The brief, uncontrolled outbreak of anger at Humboldt University—recalling similar scenes in France—was particularly shocking to those who were certain that the German trade unions, the Left Party and their political supporters would be able to keep the social protests in Berlin toothless and under control.

The immediate attempt to denounce the demonstration is an indication that the SPD-Left Party Senate is not prepared to rescind any of the austerity measures enacted in recent years. While they concede that the population is entitled to protest against the cutbacks, they maintain such protests must remain strictly within the accepted channels. For the political elite, there is no alternative to the cuts being made in social services. If protests go beyond the level of "dialogue," then the "nation's free order" will be defended with full force.

The same thinking lies behind the lame statement made by the Left Party's youth association. Its representative, Benjamin-Christoph Krüger of the Shalom workgroup, has said he has sympathy for the protests, but has condemned the damage as having nothing to do with criticism of the education system. He also assumes anti-Semitic motives were behind the students' actions.

The police are currently investigating offences, including breach of public peace, trespassing and violations of the right of assembly. There will no doubt be further attempts to intimidate the organisers of the demonstration. According to the head of the regional bureau of criminal investigation, the organisers had no control over the "mob" and therefore this failure to keep order would be taken into consideration in future registrations of demonstrations and events.

It should be noted, however, that the police found no evidence supporting their claims that the damage inflicted by the demonstrators was motivated by anti-Semitism.

University staff noted that black-clad figures of indeterminate age had entered the building in the course of the protests. Slogans such as "Mere demonstrations are pointless" and "We have to act more visibly" and repeated calls for "resistance" could be heard. It is entirely possible that provocateurs were specifically deployed to smear the demonstration as a whole.

At the G8 summit in Genoa, in 2001, it emerged that the Italian police force employed so-called Black Bloc agents-provocateurs against demonstrators. During the demonstration, police then "discovered" the same Molotov cocktails that had been planted earlier by their own agents. There were indications that the police used similar tactics at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany. In May 2007, *Der Spiegel* reported that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BND) had declared critics of globalisation to be a strategic focus of operations at the start of the year, and had spied on many preparatory meetings for protests at the summit.

The BND also infiltrated the groups involved in organising the demonstrations in Germany.

Irrespective of whether agitators were involved or not, the students' anger over the appalling condition of the education system is genuine. For years, students in the German capital have confronted concerted opposition from the SPD, Left Party and trade unions, who, despite numerous protests, have not shifted in the least from their rightward trajectory.

It should also be kept in mind that the student demonstrations took place as public service workers, including many teachers, were involved in protests against the cutbacks implemented by the SPD-Left Party Senate. The action by public service workers was sold out by the unions representing teaching staff in collaboration with the Senate.

The links between the unions and Senate are direct and intimate. The longstanding leader of the teachers trade union, the GEW (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft), Erhard Laube, switched to the post of school board head, a position subordinate to the Education Department of the Senate. Since then, one of Laube's responsibilities has been the regulation of teacher ratios in schools. The lack of teachers is one of the main demands of the protesting students and teaching staff.

Growing frustration about a succession of protests yielding no results expressed itself clearly at the student demonstration. The alternative, however, lies not in spectacular actions and violence, which can only encourage the ruling elite to exert further reprisals. Students can only defend themselves against the SPD/Left Party Senate and its policies if they turn to the working class and a socialist perspective.

While the Berlin Senate members claim there is no money available for education, they support handing out €500 billion to the banks overnight. It could not be clearer that the interests of the ruling elite and the working population are irreconcilable. Only the struggle for socialism, which puts the needs of the entire society before the profit interests of the ruling elite, can overcome the crisis of the education system.



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