

Student protests in Austria

Markus Salzmann, Johannes Stern
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Student protests in Austria reached a new high point on Thursday with a nationwide day of action. Large demonstrations were held in several cities. In Vienna, the capital, thousands of students took to the streets, resulting in massive traffic jams.

Last week, more than 40,000 university and school students marched through Vienna with the slogan: “More money for education, not the banks and corporations.” Now, thousands have again taken to the streets to protest against the horrible conditions at Austria’s universities and against further cuts to the educational system.

The protest began on October 20 with a press conference at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Students and teachers are demanding “Re-democratization instead of neo-liberal policies” and the “ending of the Bologna process” to standardise higher education throughout the European Union. In particular they oppose the introduction of bachelor’s degree studies at the academy.

These demands were quickly taken up and expanded. In a demonstration on October 22, called by the academy, hundreds of students took part, expressing dissatisfaction with their living and studying conditions.

At the University of Vienna, university students have occupied the Audimax central lecture hall for the last two weeks. There have also been protest actions at universities in Linz, Klagenfurt, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Graz. In Germany, the universities at Heidelberg and Münster have also been occupied.

Since then, the Audimax has served as the centre for the protest movement, which developed spontaneously and independently of the establishment parties and their student organizations. Students discuss their demands at a daily plenum and it is possible to follow these discussions and participate in various forums via live streaming on the Internet.

The students’ demands include the abolition of tuition fees, the lifting of entrance restrictions at universities and colleges of further education, more rights for students to influence what happens in higher education, better equipment in all educational establishments, as well as the provision of sufficient and well-paid teaching staff.

The students’ anger is mainly directed against the parties in the grand coalition government, the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). Science Minister Johannes Hahn (ÖVP) is demanding further entrance restrictions be introduced at the universities.

The previous right-wing coalition government of the ÖVP and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) pushed through substantial cuts in education. Through introducing tuition fees, the government sought to reduce the state budget, on the one hand, while “raising” the level of the universities, i.e., by making them more selective. Tuition fees were introduced in 2001, which led to a noticeable and rapid decline in the number of students.

In the 2006 election campaign, the SPÖ promised to abolish tuition fees. But they remained in place after it won the election. In 2008, new legislation was supposed to make it easier for poor students to avoid paying the fees. However, this cosmetic measure has had little benefit for those from less well-off families, and for the most part they are still obligated to pay.

Science Minister Hahn has called the occupation “illegal,” and made clear that the government will not listen to the students’ demands. At a meeting with university student representatives he opposed making any concessions. Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ), who for a long time has made no statement about the protests, is maintaining the government line.

Only the mayor of Vienna, Michael Häupl (SPÖ), has said the demonstrators have raised “justified demands.”

Since he supports the retention of tuition fees, however, his stance is hypocritical. His feigned support for the students is bound up with next year's elections for the state legislature in Vienna. Following the continuous defeats for the SPÖ in recent months, Häupl is afraid the party will also lose its majority in the capital.

All parties—from the right-wing extremist FPÖ, to SPÖ and the Greens—share responsibility for the cuts and the imposition of market-politics in education. In conjunction with the introduction of tuition fees, university funding is also being cut. It is estimated today that at least 50 percent of students are compelled to work as well as study.

Hahn and other government representatives try to lay the blame on the students themselves. Hahn has already unleashed a debate about “*numerus clausus* refugees” from the quota restrictions in Germany, who are allegedly driving up university costs in Austria, and whose numbers can only be curbed by imposing entrance restrictions.

Right-wing student groups on the fringes of the FPÖ, with the energetic support of some in the media, deride the “utopian demands” of the “lazy” students.

However, the official student representatives are also unable to offer the protesters any far-reaching perspective. The university student representative body is dominated by the student organizations of the SPÖ, the ÖVP and the Greens. The demonstrations in Vienna were organised by the SPÖ's Socialist Youth organisation, from which it has recruited its leading cadres for decades.

If the protests for a comprehensive and solidarity-based educational system are to be successful they must be directed against these political forces. The transformation of education into a commodity and its subordination to the immediate interests of the market are directly linked to the capitalist crisis.

The attacks on education in recent years cannot be seen separately from the attacks on the working and living conditions of the general population. According to the latest forecasts, the Austrian economy will continue to decline, with unemployment growing well into 2010, in particular among young people. At the same time, the SPÖ and ÖVP are working on new “reforms,” which will further weaken what remains of the welfare state.

In this situation, the Austrian government and all the

parliamentary parties regard the student protests as a great danger. Under no circumstances should they be allowed to link up with the labour disputes that are inevitable in view of the economic crisis. Therefore the student organizations of the SPÖ (Socialist Youth) and the Greens (GAJ) are seeking to influence the protest movement—with the aim of keeping it under control.

If the protests are to be successful and implement their demands, such attempts at influence and control by the established parties and organizations must be sharply rejected. It is necessary to discuss and develop a political perspective that wages a struggle against the capitalist social order. It is necessary to do the very thing that the ruling class fears most: to orient the protests to the working class.

Broad sections of working people support the students' protests because they are confronted with the same economic and social problems. A poll by the Klagenfurt Humaninstitut found that 42 percent of those surveyed support the student protests, while only 28 percent oppose them.

The aim must be the construction of an independent political movement that redistributes the existing social wealth and places the economy under the democratic control of the population. Such a struggle can only be led successfully on the basis of an international, socialist programme.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) calls on university and school students to study our programme and actively take part in this struggle.



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