

Politicians, media strive to contain student protests in Austria and Germany

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25 November 2009

Just over a month ago, on October 20, students occupied the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, initiating a wave of protests at Austrian universities that has since spread to universities throughout Germany. Students have occupied lecture rooms in many cities and have conducted detailed discussions on how to achieve their demands.

The student protests, however, lack any clear perspective. While in Austria many students have raised social demands such as an unconditional basic income for all those wishing to study, there are tendencies at work in the movement intent on limiting the protests to the universities and keeping demands restricted entirely to the sphere of education.

Influential figures in political, business and media circles have used this political confusion in order to embrace and, at the same time, stifle the protests. Even the conservative German minister of education, Annette Schavan, expressed her “understanding” for the student’s actions. This is the same woman who in June had defamed student protesters and their demands as “antiquated.”

What lies behind the about-face by this minister, and how can students prevent politicians and the media from exploiting the protests for their own aims?

When one looks more closely, the reasoning behind Schavan’s change of tack becomes clear. The same pattern can be detected in other spheres of the German government’s policy. While there is much talk by leading government representatives about “understanding” and the “need for consensus,” and a few meaningless concessions made to socially disadvantaged layers, behind the scenes the coalition of conservative parties with the free-market Free Democratic Party is preparing all the more intently to

draw up and implement its completely reactionary programme.

The recent declarations of sympathy and the announcement by Schavan that there would be an increase in student grants starting October 1, 2010, have to be seen in this light. Any increase in student grants would be meager, and no details have emerged anyway—merely a declaration of intent. Even if a small increase were made, it would do nothing to improve the precarious living conditions of many students forced to hold themselves above water with badly paid jobs. Any increase would also do little to persuade larger numbers of youth to commence higher education; the parental allowance system, which decides whether a student receives a grant, is likely to remain the same.

Schavan’s announcement is merely a tactical move aimed at implementing the planned “national scholarship system,” which is opposed by a number of German states headed by Social Democratic Party (SPD) authorities. A handful of conservative (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) states have also expressed reservations about the plan. At the start of October, state cultural affairs ministers had pleaded for an increase in student grants, and Schavan has now made them this concession.

The scholarship model proposed by Schavan envisages that 10 percent of the best-qualified students receive a subsidy of €300 per month, irrespective of the income of their parents. The federal and state administrations are to provide half of the financing for this project, while the remaining 50 percent must be raised by the universities in direct collaboration with business interests. In the highly selective German education system, this scholarship model will invariably favour students from a middle class background and only intensify competition in the

selection process. At the same time, the scholarship scheme enables companies and big business to deepen their involvement in the education process.

The most recent proposal by Schavan reveals the real nature of her political agenda. Her proposal to promote students from low-income households on a long-term basis by “an education savings programme” is aimed at undermining the current student grant system and gradually replacing it with a private financial sponsorship model. Parents are to be encouraged to save money for the education of their children. Such saving can obviously only be done by those with a sufficiently high income. In the media, the model is already compared to the recently introduced Riester pension model, which also seeks to replace a state-guaranteed pensions system by a model based on personal savings. An adequate pension is only paid to those with enough money to save, and now the same principle is to be applied to education. Good, comprehensive education will become exclusively reserved for those with wealthy parents.

Schavan’s education policy has received broad support from the media and politicians, including the Left Party. The executive director of the student federation of the Left Party (Linke.SDS), Friederike Benda, declared that the fact that “Schavan has promised an increase in student grants for 2010 can be rated as a success for the education strike.” The Linke.SDS encourages the illusion that it possible to pressure CDU minister Schavan, and in so doing aids the process of subordinating education to business interests while undermining the basic right to education.

In the same manner as Benda, the university spokeswoman of the German parliamentary faction of the Left Party, Nicole Gohlke, has sought in a press release to present Schavan’s right-wing agenda and the announced increase in student grants as a success resulting from the student protests. While the education minister uses student grants as a means to implement her national scholarship system, Gohlke declares that the two issues have nothing to do with one another. Instead of addressing and openly criticising Schavan’s proposals, Gohlke demands that Schavan stop “playing around” and “finally be concrete”.

The policy of the Left Party and its student federation is completely bankrupt. After declaring for years that it

was possible to pressurise the SPD to the “left,” they have now evidently decided that it is preferable to apply similar pressure to the CDU.

In the course of beginning the implementation of the Bologna education process in Germany, carrying out vicious anti-welfare policies and taking Germany into war in Afghanistan, the SPD proved immune to any pressure from below. Now, the Left Party concludes that the leadership of the CDU should be forced to make concessions. Such a perspective is completely absurd amid a crisis of capitalism.

The social and student protests of past years demonstrated that the establishment parties cannot be diverted from their course through pressure from below. The Left Party is living proof: despite major protests and a half-year strike at all Berlin universities in 2003, the SPD-Left Party Senate in Berlin went ahead with its plans to axe €75 million from its budget for the city’s universities.

The issues raised in the course of the protests cannot be answered within the universities themselves. The ruination of the education system is directly bound up with the crisis of capitalism. Two trillion euros promised to the banks must be redeemed in coming years from the population at large. The defence of the basic right to education requires therefore a socialist perspective.



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