

For an independent working class movement to defend education

ISSE (Germany)
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The demonstrations taking place all over the world, including the weeks-long occupation of lecture-rooms in a number of European countries, are an important step in the struggle against the profit-oriented restructuring of the education system. These protests are part of social conflicts that are erupting on an international scale as the economic crisis deepens.

The demands raised by students following intense discussions are to be welcomed: an end to the system of study fees that limit access to higher education to all but a wealthy elite, the democratization of schools and universities, and increases in education funding.

It would be completely wrong, however, to believe that such goals can be achieved merely on the basis of protest. Students and workers are confronted not simply with a misguided educational policy, but rather with the deliberate restructuring of the education system in the interest of the profit system. This policy has been supported by all of the main political parties and implemented despite a series of protests and demonstrations by those affected.

At the heart of changes in Germany and throughout Europe is the subordination of education to the direct needs of the capitalist market. Broad education is to be replaced by training aimed at producing in the shortest period of time specialists in a particular field. The introduction of an earlier school age, the shortening of the period at school to 12 years, and the introduction of bachelor's degrees have served to cut the average study time of students by several years.

The so-called Bologna process, introduced by the European Union, aims to implement the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) agreement throughout Europe. According to the GATS agreement, all services, including first and foremost education, are

to be strictly subject to the dictates of the free market. The hundreds of billions invested in education by states across the globe are to be diverted to further the interests and balance sheets of big businesses and investors.

This means that the activities of kindergartens, schools and universities will be judged entirely from the standpoint of how much utility and profit they yield. The inevitable result will be an increase in stress for students and the further decay of buildings and facilities. Study courses with a social content and those encouraging critical faculties on the part of students are to be increasingly sacrificed. A comprehensive education system will be the preserve of a tiny elite, which has money and the appropriate contacts.

All of these processes are being intensified as the economic crisis deepens. The collapse of the financial markets has led to an extraordinary increase in social inequality. Under conditions where huge cuts have been made in a broad range of social facilities, wages slashed and entire social welfare systems dismantled, the German government has guaranteed two trillion euro of taxpayer's money to the major banks. The current German government is now intent on recouping this money by further attacks on the interests of the population at large.

Such policies are not limited to the restructuring of the education system. Following an accelerated phase of study, young people in their early twenties are to be thrown onto a market with insecure jobs and low wages. Most young university graduates are already dependent on a wage and work under permanently uncertain conditions. They are part of the working class.

When it comes to defending our rights, students, alongside the rest of the working population in

Germany, confront not only the present coalition government of the conservative union parties and the Free Democratic Party, but also the remaining political parties, together with business interests and the trade unions. They are all working together to save capitalism at the expense of the majority of the population.

During its seven-year term in office (1998-2005), the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green coalition carried out unprecedented social attacks, including their Agenda 2010, and led the country into new wars of aggression in violation of international law. It also began to implement the Bologna process in Germany. All of the parties' pre-election promises of a free and equitable education system dissolved into thin air when the SPD and Greens entered government.

Only the Left Party has outdone the cynicism of the SPD and the Greens. Although the youth and student federation of the Left Party participate in every demonstration protesting education cuts, the Left Party in Berlin together with the SPD has slashed spending in various areas of education in the country's capital city.

At universities, the so-called "red-red" senate in Berlin has saved 75 million euro by axing 216 professorial posts (almost a quarter of all professors), dismissed 500 other university staff, closed entire faculties and cut 10,000 university places in the city.

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Similar cuts were introduced in schools in Berlin, which, like the universities, are run down and urgently in need of financial assistance. The senate introduced new charges for parents (averaging up to 100 euro per year and child) for teaching materials. In addition, the senate axed 400 posts for apprentice teachers in Berlin between 2005 and 2006. The corresponding hole in teaching schedules was then filled by increasing the workload of full-time teachers by two hours per week.

The SPD, Left Party and the Greens have demonstrated that they will not yield in the slightest to public pressure. Numerous major protests against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, against the Hartz IV measures and the 2003 demonstrations in Berlin against education cuts were unable to induce these parties to deviate from their course. They are unshakeable in their defense of the capitalist system in crisis.

The answer to the comprehensive attacks against

education must be a completely independent political movement of the working class. In this respect the occupation of lecture-rooms, the broad discussion at student assemblies over demands and perspectives are to be welcomed. The task now is to make this movement the starting point of a general mobilization of the working population.

Such a movement must create bodies that function independently of the old bureaucracies, official parties and trade unions. Above all, it must reject any solution restricted to the framework of capitalism. As an international movement it must adopt a socialist program that gives priority to the principle of social equality instead of the enrichment of a tiny social layer.

The struggle for a comprehensive and free education system plays a huge role in this struggle. It is the vital precondition for a genuinely democratic society. If education is to be oriented to the requirements of the general population and serve the development of all, then it must be freed from the clutches of the free market system and subjected to democratic control. The struggle for a fair and comprehensive education system is therefore closely bound up with the fight for the socialist transformation of society.

The education protests raise questions that cannot be answered simply at the universities. We confront the task of developing a worldwide social movement aimed at replacing capitalism. This is the aim of the International Students for Social Equality, which is affiliated to the Fourth International. We invite students to contact us and join the ISSE today.



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