

Thousands of students demonstrate in Leipzig

Our correspondents
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More than 9,000 school and university students joined a demonstration in the German city of Leipzig on November 24 under the slogans: “No vote without our consent! For a democratic education policy!”

There was widespread agreement among those participating that the issue of education could not be separated from broader political questions. This was clear from many of the self-made banners and placards that demonstrators carried, and was confirmed in the course of discussions held with students by a team of WSWs reporters. Many demonstrators were skeptical about achieving their demand for a free, democratic and fair education system by merely applying pressure to the established parties.

Guillaume, a 21-year-old student from France, who is studying in Leipzig for two years, said he doubted whether protests would be enough. He referred to the experiences in France, where massive student protests have taken place—but with little result. Guillaume rejects the Bologna Process, introduced throughout the European Union, which subordinates education to the forces of the free market. Any attempt to reverse the process, however, involves far-reaching political issues. When asked his opinion of the established political parties, Guillaume said they had consistently ignored students and their problems in the past. This was not surprising, however, because the very same politicians and parties had decided upon and implemented the Bologna Process.

Two students, Undine Ott and Nora Bischoff, were also dismissive of attempts to achieve changes in education policy merely through protest. “We have been protesting for years and always on the basis of the same demands. Nevertheless, things have only got worse. Despite our protests, ‘elite universities’ and study fees have been introduced. Of course it is important to take part in demonstrations and protests actions but it is necessary to think through whether such action is by itself sufficient.”

Tim, 22, had traveled to the Leipzig demonstration as part of

a contingent from Nordhausen. One of the reasons he had come was to protest against the newly introduced Bachelor system, which had significantly increased the workload for students. The system of modules involved in the new degree courses leaves little opportunity for students to develop or follow their own fields of interest. He was especially critical of the Greens and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had played the leading role in introducing the new system and he had no confidence in any of the parties and organizations that were officially supporting the demonstration. “If I want to trust a party, then I have to set up one myself,” he said. “The problem is that all parties take part in the same big game. There are sufficient resources, but they are unfairly and incorrectly distributed.”

Standing in stark contrast to the thoughtful and critical stance taken by many participants was the position taken by the organizers of the demonstration, who merely proclaimed the necessity for more action. Instead of raising political questions and the role of the establishment parties in education cuts, representatives from the “Action Committee against study fees” (ABS), the Conference of Saxony Students (KSS) and the Leipzig University student body merely trotted out the same tired, old empty slogans against a background of deafening pop music.

The organizers sought to encourage the illusion that students could realize their demands by expressing “loud criticism” in front of the conference of college principals (HRK), which was meeting in Leipzig at the same time as the student demonstration. This is despite the fact that the HRK has always unconditionally implemented policies laid down by the federal or state governments. Predictably the HRK president, Margret Wintermantel, declared at a press conference in Leipzig that the new Bachelors and Masters courses had been a success despite some initial teething problems.

A small group of students who had occupied the rector’s office at Leipzig University on November 23 also put forward entirely limited demands, which have been dismissed by the University rector, Franz Häuser.

The speeches at the end of the demonstration also made clear the organizers' lack of any broader perspective. Speaking on behalf of the ABS, Christina Schrandt sought to spread the illusion that grass roots pressure exerted by students in combination with "social movements and the trade unions" could force the authorities and the HRK to withdraw proposals for the introduction of study fees—although the HRK had already expressed its support for such fees in 2004. Schrandt made no mention of the Bologna Process and its subordination of the education system to commercial interests—of which study fees is just one element.

The next speaker, Sigrid Meuschel, Professor for Political Studies at the University of Leipzig, went even further in her speech. She openly defended the Bologna reforms, which, she declared, required a few cosmetic changes. Students greeted her speech with booing and catcalls.

Anne Voß, from the public service trade union Verdi, also called for some changes to the Bologna Process and the Bachelors-Masters courses. She called for an "active social state" and "equal educational opportunities for all" but only received mild applause. Many students are aware of the role played by the trade unions in dismantling jobs and encouraging forms of low-paid work.

The only speaker to address the broader political issues involved in the student strike was Johannes Stern from the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) group at Leipzig University. He emphasized that protest alone was insufficient to realize the demands raised by students for the democratization of the education system and increased funding.

Stern said: "We are not confronted merely with this or that incorrect decision in the sphere of education policy, but rather with a fundamental restructuring of the existing system in the interests of big business and the free market. Past experience has shown that this course is supported by all the established political parties—despite the massive protests and demonstrations we have carried out in recent years."

Stern referred to the catastrophic education balance sheet in those regions governed by the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party—that is, all those parties that had pledged their support for the student protests. "It was the SPD-Green Party federal government which not only implemented the anti-social welfare Agenda 2010 but also in 1999 initiated the implementation of the Bologna Process in Germany. This despite the fact that in their election campaign in 1998 both the SPD and Greens had promised a free and fair education system."

Stern continued: "For its part the Left party has demonstrated that it has no equal when in political opposition it extols the

virtues of a free and fair education system, only to implement the exact opposite when it comes into office. Together with the SPD in Berlin, the Left Party has participated in a veritable orgy of education cuts. At Berlin's universities alone, the city's SPD-Left Party Senate has slashed 75 million euros from budgets, including the axing of 216 professorial posts and the sacking of 500 other campus staff. Entire faculties have been closed and the number of student places available in the German capital has been reduced by 10,000."

Stern stressed that success for the student protests was bound up with drawing the necessary lessons from the role of these parties and developing an alternative political perspective. He said: "The experience of past years has shown that the student bodies affiliated to the SPD, Greens and Left Party are our opponents when we attempt to defend the basic right to education. In order to fulfill our aims we require an independent movement from below and we should use today's demo and the occupations at the universities as the starting point for such a broad movement of the working population.

"Such a movement must be independent and international, and in particular we cannot accept the ever-narrowing framework of capitalism. We need a socialist perspective. The principle of social equality must stand at the heart of social needs, instead of the enrichment of a small elite at the top of society."

At the end of his speech, which was greeted with considerable applause, Stern quoted from an ISSE leaflet, 2,000 copies of which had been distributed to demonstrators. "The struggle for a comprehensive and free education system plays a huge role in this struggle," it explained. "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."



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