

Student protests continue in Austria

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For the last four weeks, Austrian students have been occupying lecture halls at universities throughout the country. In Vienna, Graz, Klagenfurt, Innsbruck, Salzburg and Linz, daily meetings and discussions are taking place on cultural and political topics. Thousands of students are discussing what must change in the universities and in society. There have been repeated demonstrations, and last week students supported the protests of engineering workers.

The movement began October 20, when students at the academy of fine arts in Vienna boycotted lectures and occupied the main auditorium. At first, their demands were limited to internal issues at the university, but their protest found support at other institutions of higher education in the city, including the University of Vienna, which participated in a protest march. The demonstrators decided to establish their headquarters in the occupied Audimax, the main auditorium of the University of Vienna. From there, the movement rapidly grew.

“I came into the Audimax at 8pm”, explained Agnes, a 24-year-old psychology student. “It was full to bursting. There was much commitment and passion. People who had ideas also got involved”.

The movement spread rapidly in Austria and finally throughout Europe by means of a central website developed by the students themselves, as well via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Everywhere students are expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of financial support, university entrance restrictions and the pressure to perform.

Christoph is 19 years old and is studying archaeology at the University of Vienna. He has participated in the protests because he rejects the “Bologna process”. “The course system is a great problem; it’s impossible to study according to one’s interests”, he said.

Another student at the University of Vienna stressed the importance of self-determination: “For me, it is important that learning is liberal and self-directed. That is, we can go to other lectures, that we don’t have to register specially for another course of studies. Moreover, I think it’s important that there are autonomous areas, like the occupied lecture halls, where one can work through things together outside of the seminars”.

Markus, a 23-year-old medical student, believes education spending in Austria clearly needs to be increased: “We need not fewer university places, but more money”.

Architecture student Anna Lena does not want to limit her demands to this. She said, “It’s not just about more funds for the universities. In order to implement free education for all, there also have to be social demands. A demand that would go in this direction would be a basic level of social protection and a minimum wage. This is the only way autonomous learning can become possible at all”.

Demands raised in the Audimax include: an end to the system of social selection by means of tuition fees and the promotion of an elite; the democratization of schools and universities; and increasing education funding to prevent precarious conditions of employment and develop alternative education programs.

Federal Chancellor Werner Faymann (Austrian Social Democratic Party, SPÖ), like his education minister Johannes Hahn (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP), has made clear that he is not willing to meet these demands, even partially. University entrance restrictions are

necessary, he stressed, only offering investments for university renovations. He also confirmed the pledge to increase education expenditure by 2020 to 2 percent of gross domestic product.

In order to try and bring the protests under control, the government has announced a conference under the title “university dialogue”. On November 25, fifty representatives from the universities, politics and business are to discuss the future of the Austrian university system. However, the gathering will not only exclude the public but also the protesting students. Only three student representatives will be allowed to participate, but these will not be freely chosen by the students themselves, but will instead be appointed by the Austrian National Union of Students (ÖH).

The ÖH is dominated by the student federations of the SPÖ (VSStÖ) and the Greens (GRASS). Only 25 percent of students took part in the last ÖH elections. “The ÖH is a contentious topic here, because such an election turnout means you can't really talk about them being our representatives”, said Agnes. The ÖH recently tried to buy itself into the movement with a promise to make €100,000 available to it.

“Under these conditions, ‘university dialogue’ will probably become just a university monologue”, according to Martin, a student at the Vienna Technical University. The plenary meeting at the Audimax initially agreed to send a delegation. However, the students made clear that this meeting cannot lead to anything: “It is a disaster, if 50 people sit down for three hours in a room and each has less than one minute speaking time”.



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