

Tens of thousands demonstrate in Germany against railway project

Our correspondents

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Tens of thousands of demonstrators packed the centre of Stuttgart last Saturday (9 October) in the biggest rally so far opposing the city's plans for the building of a new main underground railway station. Organisers estimated the crowd at 150,000, while the police put the number taking part at 63,000.

The final rally took place in the city's central Schlossgarten under the slogan "Stop building now, then talks". This slogan is linked to the demand raised two days ago by the former general secretary of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Heiner Geißler, following his appointment as arbitrator in the dispute. Geisler, whose appointment has been supported by the Green Party, had called for a halt to construction of the new station as a precondition for talks. Any agreement on this demand, however, was immediately denied by the head of the city administration, Stefan Mappus, (CDU) and the head of German Rail, Rüdiger Grube.

Those taking part in Saturday's demonstration came from every social layer and all age groups. A number of protesters had climbed into the branches of trees and stayed overnight in order to protect the trees from being cut down. Many banners called for the current rail station situated at ground level to be kept open and for the preservation of the nearby park.

Protesters took to the streets out of opposition to the way in which the city administration was prepared to pay out billions in tax payers' money for the building of the expensive underground station, while at the same time implementing severe budget cuts affecting all aspects of social life. Secondly, they are opposed to the ruthless manner in which the administration has sought to push ahead with its project—even to the point of mounting brutal police interventions to break up protests.

None of the speakers at the rally on Saturday addressed these questions. Instead they restricted their contributions to completely secondary issues, such as where tracks were to be laid, timetables and the costs of the project, as well as the latest state of proposed talks with the head of the state CDU,

Mappus.

On the last point Gangolf Stocker, speaking on behalf of the Action Alliance against the "Stuttgart 21" railway project, declared that the group was ready to talk when the administration declared it was ready to consider "a withdrawal from the project". This formulation made clear that the main concern of political organisations active inside the alliance, such as the Greens and self styled leftist groups, is to keep the mass movement under control.

Hardly any of the speakers addressed the violent police action undertaken against demonstrators 10 days earlier. On September 30, police used water cannon, clubs and pepper spray against defenceless protesters, consisting mainly of school students and elderly people. Over 100 were injured, with two people suffering severe eye injuries following the use of water cannon.

Many participants attended the demonstration on Saturday in order to protest against this brutal police intervention. Some banners read, "And now, tanks and soldiers, Herr Mappus?" and "Defend the right to assemble". One banner hung on the north side of the main station, which has already been demolished, read "Square of Heavenly Peace", recalling the massacre of students that took place in China in June 1989.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of university and school students who were victims of the police intervention on September 30. Some of them reported that school students had been repeatedly provoked by the police prior to the use of water cannon.

Stephane reported that during the course of an official demonstration in the centre of Stuttgart many students received information via SMS that measures were being undertaken to cut down 100-year-old trees. The youth then rushed to the Schlossgarten in an attempt to prevent the destruction of the trees.

"We were in the park when police dressed in civilian clothes approached us", Stephane reported. "They began to push us around, shout insults and abuse us. It was clear they were attempting to provoke a violent reaction". Shortly

afterwards the police moved in with water cannon and pepper spray.

Stephane continued, “The question is, why were water cannon kept standing by for an officially registered demonstration of school students between 12 and 14 years of age? It is clear that the state authorities had prepared a violent response. The strategy of those in command was to provoke people to the point where they were forced to physically defend themselves. The initial police reports declared that we had thrown stones, but this is a complete lie, and later the police themselves were forced to revise their own report”.

Luis (aged 15) was also in the Schlossgarten on September 30 and was a victim of the police use of pepper spray. “The politicians lie through their teeth and twist events around”, he said. “In my view they sought to deliberately escalate the protest, this is why they carried out such a brutal intervention”.

Lena also attended the September 30 rally. “We all had the impression that the police were prepared to use force from the very start in order to intimidate us”, she said. “We sat down in front of them, and they responded with water cannon. I saw police brusquely shoving aside a young child of perhaps seven or eight. I was shocked and wondered what do they have in mind?”

Lena related what happened next: “Suddenly we were surrounded by police and could not escape. They dropped the visors on their helmets, and one of them began to spray tear gas at close quarters. That was really bad. My friend tripped and lay on the ground. A policeman twisted her arm behind her back and dragged her up. As a result, her arm was dislocated and she suffered considerable pain”.

Lena concluded, “I will never vote for the CDU or Free Democratic Party again. I have also lost my confidence in the Social Democratic Party, because it no longer takes social issues seriously”. When asked about the Greens, Lena declared she had voted for the party at the last elections. She added, however, “Really one cannot vote for any of the parties. Even in the case of the Greens, one sees how, once in government, they go back on the promises they made in election campaigns”. What is needed, Lena concluded, “Is a new party opposed to capitalism and exploitation”.

Many of the placards at last Saturday’s demonstration drew attention to the huge discrepancy between the current social crisis and the billions planned for the Stuttgart 21 project. Employees of one central clinic, for example, sported a placard saying, “You waste billions for the nonsense 21, while we urgently need personnel!”

Ellina and Gessica from Bad Cannstatt told the WSWS, “We are angry that money is being squandered which could be used for education and for investment in our futures. We

have too few teachers, and lessons are continually being cancelled”. Both youth were angry with the way in which the police had intervened with water cannon against the prior demonstration. “They just wanted to create an excuse to push ahead with the project using force. That has nothing more to do with democracy”.

Jesus, who is doing his training in a nursing home for the elderly, told the WSWS, “Especially in the sphere of care for the elderly there is a drastic lack of personnel. I witness that every day. Where I work, I have just 15 minutes per patient in order to help them get up, wash and eat. This is simply too little! We need more time and more personnel, but then we are told there is no money. As a result, the elderly and the infirm are increasingly being kept like animals in a cage”.

The Socialist Equality Party set up its own book table in the Schlossgarten and distributed a leaflet “Stuttgart 21—the real issues”, which was the source of a great deal of discussion and interest. The leaflet was the only one to address the broader issues behind the dispute over the controversial project.

It stated that the plans of the administration in Stuttgart can be “combated only with a perspective that challenges capitalist control over the levers of economic power. The banks and large corporations should be nationalized, placed under democratic control and used for the benefit of the whole of society, not the individual profits of the owners and shareholders. Only on this basis will it be possible to meaningfully plan major infrastructure projects such as the Stuttgart train station with the democratic participation of all stakeholders”.

The leaflet then pointed out that the “realization of such a socialist perspective calls for a broad movement of working people. This requires a political break with the Greens, the SPD, the Left Party and the unions, who all defend capitalism”.



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