

Demonstration in Berlin against data retention and the surveillance state

Our correspondents
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Under the slogan “Freedom Not Fear”, a demonstration against data retention, data misuse and the surveillance state was held for the fifth time in Berlin last Saturday. While in previous years, tens of thousands of young people and IT enthusiasts joined these demonstrations, this time only a few thousand participants marched from the Brandenburg Gate to Alexanderplatz.

The procession was dominated by the pervasive presence of nearly all the bourgeois parties. The Left Party, Greens, Free Democratic Party (FDP) and especially the Pirate Party filled the skies with their party balloons, distributed their flyers and made discussion almost impossible by blaring the loudest possible background music. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) was represented mainly by its youth movement, “The Falcons”. The only major party missing from the occasion was the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which specifically campaigns for data retention and the strengthening of all forms of public surveillance.

The concern of many of the demonstrators for the increasing attacks on democratic rights and misuse of new media is certainly justified. But the parties and organisations setting the tone merely drew attention to the symptoms of increased public spying and data hoarding by businesses and government. The Left Party’s and Greens’ leaflets against the “police state” even demanded a strengthening of the police force in Berlin!

Towards the end of the event, the numerous police present had the chance to give a little demonstration of what they can do. A wide area of the venue was cordoned off because an abandoned piece of luggage was found, which turned out—after being blown up by a bomb disposal robot—to be a sack containing plastic

bags.

The small number of non-official participants this year is a result of the role played by the organisers and established parties themselves in the dismantling of democratic rights. The Greens, Left Party, FDP and SPD are all involved in the upgrading of the city’s surveillance technology and the expansion of police powers.

They are also particularly responsible for the growing social inequality, which is incompatible with the maintenance of democratic rights for the population. The hard-won social gains of the working class are being dashed, and young people driven into poverty and hopelessness everywhere in Europe. Fear of social explosions like those in the UK is the real driving force behind the bolstering of state power.

It is no wonder then that the parties present had little of substance to say about the demonstration’s central theme, intentionally evading any confrontation with the issue.

Even the Pirate Party (promoting civil rights in communication technology), so ubiquitous at the demo with its balloons and orange flags, was determined to avoid making an open stand. This party, which only a few days earlier received its first major donation from a businessman, addressed neither the repression of young people in Britain, nor social conditions in Berlin.

The Pirates are now firmly positioned in a common front with the established parties, which exploited the demonstration purely to advertise themselves for the election and avoid all the burning issues. The party had already made it clear that it defends the market economy and the dictates of the banks. Its presence at the demonstration showed its incapacity to act in accord with its central political theme—the defence of democratic rights.

Of all parties present at the demonstration, only the Socialist Equality Party (PSE) broached the issue of the relationship between the European-wide cuts in social spending and the dismantling of democratic rights. Johannes Schott (PSE) explained over the public address system that the attacks on democratic rights had not come out of the blue:

“Increasing social inequality is incompatible with democratic rights. The banks in every European country are dictating the policies and governments are enforcing them at the expense of the population. On the other hand, opposition is being brutally suppressed, as in Britain. It follows that we can only assert our democratic rights by taking up the fight against these governments and against the dictates of the banks”.

Only when the banks are expropriated and the economy democratised will we be able to speak of a democratic society, said Schott.

Supporters of the PSE were led by a banner proclaiming, “Defend the British youth! For the United Socialist States of Europe”. The party thus accentuated the developments mentioned by Schott in his address. Following the riots in the UK, tens of thousands of young people were sentenced to draconian prison terms for the most trifling offences, such as the theft of water bottles.

The PSE’s information tables were approached mainly by demonstrators who were not part of any political grouping. They were obviously disgusted by the hypocrisy of the established parties’ electoral propaganda and showed interest in the socialist perspective advocated by the PSE to oppose the dictatorship of the banks. They were particularly interested in the European workers’ rally against cuts in social welfare, war and racism, which will be held at Berlin’s Tempodrom next Saturday, and which is expected to attract delegations from a number of European countries.



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