Berlin elections: 5,000 demonstrate for better education

Our correspondents
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Just over a week before the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives (state legislature), about 5,000 parents, students and teachers demonstrated against the decline of education in the German capital.

The demonstration was called by an alliance of statewide committees of parents and students, day nursery parents committee, the "High School in Danger" initiative, the working group for music education, the Berlin State Music Council and the Education and Science Union (GEW).

"The education system in Berlin is sick," says the joint statement calling for the protest. "There is a lack of nursery places, classes are often cancelled, there is a shortage of teachers and professionals in nurseries and kindergartens, and school buildings are dilapidated."

In view of the upcoming elections, the state education minister Jürgen Zöllner (Social Democratic Party, SPD) promised about 1,100 new teachers for the new school year, and to make available €196 million from state funds for the school repairs. But calculations by the district councils estimate that at least half a billion euros would be required to undertake the urgently needed repairs.

There continues to be a lack of teachers. The under-recruitment of new teachers in recent years has meant that the average age of a teacher in Berlin has risen to 50.6 years. When the SPD-Left Party city administration first entered office this stood at 48.4 years.

In addition, tenured teachers in Berlin have to work 42 hours per week instead of 40, providing 26 hours of class contact time instead of 24. The Berlin Senate (state executive) has also abolished the scheme whereby teachers approaching retirement could work shorter hours. Because of this deterioration in working conditions, around 1,450 Berlin teachers are ill for long periods.

The joint call for the demonstration on Saturday called for more investment in education. With many self-made posters and banners, the protesters marched from Alexanderplatz to the Gendarmenmarkt.

"Class sizes like during the Kaiser's time? No, thanks","35 hours is enough—even for students" and "I was once a happy teacher", could be read on the posters carried by teachers and students. "We want to work pedagogically, not just be a child warehouse", read a banner carried by after-school staff. They demanded, "Smaller groups, better working conditions and better staffing." On its flyers, the Berlin State Parents Committee called for a "rescue package for schools."

"The billions spent on the banks and for wars are a slap in the face for our children", read the banner carried by Sandra, mother of a seven-year-old daughter. She complained about the shortage of teachers and the frequent cancellation of lessons. "The Education Act commits schools to provide education," she said. "But they fail to do this because of the constant cuts." Her daughter goes to an elementary school at Arkona Platz in Berlin-Mitte. She attends a multi-age class with other children aged 5-9 years. "The concept of a multi-age class is great. But in my daughter's class there are 27 children. That's way too many for this concept."

Kose Marina has been working for 31 years as an educator in East and West Berlin. She is currently working at the Europaschule in Berlin-Kreuzberg in the leisure department. "Education is always a low priority," she complains. "We have 400 kids in our department, but only two playgrounds, and one of those is still closed because of construction work". Cuts are being made everywhere. "Our caretaker, who is excellent, is being constantly put on six-month contracts. He is constantly worried about his job."

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"I myself don't feel valued. Berlin is supposedly booming", she says, referring to the election poster of Economics Senator (minister) Harald Wolf of the Left Party. "My purse didn't notice the last pay rise."

"It's always being said that we could and should educate ourselves," continues Marina Kose. "But first, we are expected to pay for the training ourselves. And then if you want to take a course, it's only possible in the evenings or at weekends. If I were to tell my colleagues that I was planning to take a training course during working hours they would look at me with astonishment. We are constantly understaffed. When classes are cancelled the children come to our department. Then if I were also missing, the workload for our colleagues would be extreme."

Educational work and the integration of the many children with an immigrant background are virtually impossible, she says; about half the students at her school come from Turkish families. "The SPD-Left Party Senate and big business are keeping hold of the money that should be spent on education," she concludes. "There's always money there for big business, but not for education."

Susan Rößeler is a cello instructor at a music school in Berlin-Charlottenburg. She is protesting against the austerity measures in Berlin. "The city only subsidizes 10 percent of our teaching costs, 90 percent has to be paid by the parents. Now public funding will be further reduced. Sick pay is to be abolished. The city will only pay for the hours actually worked". For a long time, there's been no money during the summer holidays; now pay is going to be cut when a music teacher falls ill.

The consequences were clear to her: "Getting a permanent teaching position is impossible. We would love to hire young teachers—the demand is there, but we can't afford it, and parents can't afford the tuition fees any more. Instruments are expensive, orchestra tours are expensive. That is not affordable for many parents."

Special rates for socially disadvantaged parents are long gone. "But music is so important for the children. Berlin is an international city; music joins people together. Our pupils are not criminals". The demand is high, but money is lacking. "It's not really my style to demonstrate", she concludes, "but I have three children myself and feel that the SPD-Left Party Senate wants to abandon the idea of teaching music."

While many participants on the demonstration clearly saw the responsibility of the SPD and the Left Party for the current situation, the speakers at the rally were somewhat restrained, since most of them are closely associated with the parties in the Senate and House of Representatives. For example, GEW chair Sigrid Baumgardt supports the SPD and Left Party in the elections. The chair of the Berlin State Student Committee Jonas Botta is Green Party candidate for the district council in Steglitz-Zehlendorf; the Greens are seeking a coalition with the SPD.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG), which is also participating in the elections on 18 September, had its own delegation on the demonstration and also had an information stand at Alexanderplatz. It is the only party to name those responsible for the education crisis.

PSG members and election campaign supporters distributed thousands of leaflets at the demonstration, which states: "In a society where access to education depends largely on income, there can be no equality. The Berlin city government of the SPD and Left Party has continually cut funding for education and makes the teachers and educators into scapegoats for the misery in education. Through cuts in jobs, welfare and pay, and increased hours and student numbers, the situation is becoming increasingly unbearable for teachers and students.

"The PSG fights against the subordination of education to the immediate needs of the market. We therefore call for an end to the cuts and for massive investment in kindergartens, schools, colleges and adult education, and also in museums, libraries and theatres. The accumulated knowledge of humanity must be made freely available to all via the Internet.

"High quality education for all is only possible in a struggle against the profit interests of big business, and so can be made the basis for democratic participation in social life."

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