

Germany: Tens of thousands protest in banking quarter of Frankfurt

Our correspondents
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Around 20,000 protesters took part in a demonstration in Frankfurt-Main Saturday against the austerity measures imposed across Europe by the financial markets and the European Union. Those attending included delegations from Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Finland and other European countries, each carrying banners in their languages.

“Austerity is killing Europe”, “Goldman Sachs banker out of the ECB” and simply “At least 80 euros more for food!” were some of the slogans featured on placards and banners. Others protested in particular against the huge state and police build-up for the demonstration with slogans such as: “Is this what your democracy looks like?”, “The crisis comes, constitutional rights are ditched” and the “Banks are killing democracy”.

Participants on the demonstration were forced to pass through a series of police lines and controls, and all those who arrived at the city’s main railway station were met by a cordon of heavily armed police. On roads and intersections, buses and vans were stopped by police and searched.

On Friday, a delegation that had traveled by bus from Berlin was diverted to the suburb of Eschborn and the protesters were taken immediately into detention, in complete violation of their legal rights.

The city council had banned dozens of planned events during the so-called Blockupy protest scheduled for last Wednesday to Saturday. The city’s banking quarter had been declared a restricted area and sealed off. The police took advantage of the situation to carry out a civil war-type military exercise.

In the operation known as “kettling”, rows of police repeatedly surrounded and descended upon groups of young people. Several hundred young people were arrested, fingerprinted and held for hours in police

custody.

Saturday’s police intervention was the culmination of a huge state operation that turned large parts of Frankfurt am Main last week into a police military encampment. Thousands of police were deployed from Wednesday to Saturday to prevent protests by the Blockupy Alliance (a word derived from occupy and blockade) in the banking capital. Initially, the city had banned the planned protests; the courts then allowed a few to take place under strict conditions.

The entire financial district was completely sealed off and underground and train stations closed, along with City Hall and all public facilities. Many stores and banks sent their staff home on Friday and boarded up their windows. For days, the press tried to intimidate the public with an unprecedented hysteria about imminent “riots”.

In fact, the so-called “activists”—mostly very young demonstrators— were completely peaceful, despite a provocative police presence. For more than six months, the Occupy Frankfurt protest has camped outside the European Central Bank (ECB) without any violent incidents. On Wednesday, the police cleared the camp immediately before the protests began against the European Union’s austerity policies.

On Wednesday evening, the Supreme Court backed the most comprehensive attack on the right to demonstrate and freedom of assembly in Germany. Previously, the administrative court judges in Frankfurt and Kassel had supported a total ban on the protests instigated by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Green Party city government, with a few exceptions. Except for the mass demonstration on Saturday, all Blockupy events were prohibited.

An administrative court judge stated that even if the planned blockades were actually covered by the freedom

of assembly, they were “still illegal” because the damage caused to citizens and bankers should be given “greater emphasis” than the right to freedom of assembly.

On Thursday, police used batons when protesters refused to hand over their megaphone immediately. At the main rail station, a small group of about 150 young people was kettled and detained for hours, with those held only allowed to leave after providing their personal information.

Through loudspeakers, officers called on people again and again “to refrain from any conduct that could be construed as a demonstration”. Besides the well-armed police units, police photographic and film crews recorded any group of people that looked even vaguely like “activists”.

On Thursday, a march was planned from the central rail station with the slogan “Take the square!” The plan was to take over the city centre and organise musical and informative presentations at central locations. Songwriters like Konstantin Wecker as well as other musicians announced their participation.

These concerts, like the “rave” (dance demo) at Hauptwache in the downtown area Wednesday night, were banned outright. Konstantin Wecker told the press: “I feel quite upset about this monstrosity of banning all the events. Apparently it is really true that, when it comes to preserving the financial markets, all constitutional niceties can be dropped.”

Access roads into the financial district were closed off with barriers where armed police with helmets and shin guards were posted who prevented anyone passing through. Residents were only allowed to access their apartments only when they showed their identity cards.

Pedestrians and cyclists who were stopped on their way through the city and forced to turn back reacted with surprise and indignation. “What, is the whole city being cordoned off?” one angry cyclist called out. “It’s like a civil war.” Another man added, “It seems to me to be a police training exercise; they probably have a free hand for four days, and it’s even been sanctioned by the Supreme Court.”

A woman became increasingly angry and began to berate the police: “Shame on you! Why are you doing this! Anyone who isn’t already angry will be so now.” After some reflection, she added, “And they point their finger at Syria, Iran and Africa. But it is no different here at home, as you can see.”

On Friday, the behaviour of the police became more aggressive, and they were deployed in many parts of the

city. Small and large groups of protesters who tried to exercise their right to free speech were surrounded by police and held for hours; many of them were arrested.

By Friday afternoon, according to official figures, about 400 demonstrators had been arrested and transported to detention centres as far away as Wiesbaden and Giessen.

Early in the morning, before the union headquarters in Frankfurt, several protesters were violently thrown to the ground by police, then made to stand against the wall and searched before being taken away.

Around noon, some 200 demonstrators blockaded a central square in the city and held a rally under the slogan, “Bank robbery rather than land grabbing”. Speakers condemned speculation in food commodities, such as by Deutsche Bank and the Allianz insurance company, who make profits from this trade, plunging the poor into famine in many countries around the world. One banner read: “Deutsche Bank makes you hungry.”

Although this demonstration was completely peaceful, like all the others, the participants were surrounded by police for hours.

The ever-present police units deployed in endless columns of vehicles and implemented widespread street closures and checkpoints, especially in the inner city, making progress extremely difficult.

Even the Frankfurt Messe (trade fair site) was severely affected. Since the police had set up their headquarters at the Frankfurt Messe, all trucks and vans delivering materials were thoroughly searched, especially if they were driven by young workers who looked in any way similar to the many protesters. This hindered preparations for the next trade fair.

Any unbiased observer would have to come to the conclusion that this massive assault on democratic rights was not to prevent violence but to suppress any protest against the financial oligarchy and the EU’s austerity policies throughout Europe.



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