

Huge police operation to evict Berlin tenants

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On February 14, a huge squad of police forcibly evicted a family of five from their home in Berlin. The family had difficulties paying for the increase in rent demanded by their landlord. Fully 815 police officers and a helicopter were deployed in the suburb of Kreuzberg to evict the Turkish born family, which possessed German passports.

The family had lived in their apartment for twenty years and, in agreement with the previous homeowner, had extensively renovated their home. In return the owner had agreed not to increase their rent. At a later point, however, the landlord decided to sell the house.

The new owner failed to respect the former agreement and increased the rent. After losing a lawsuit against the rent increase the family then paid the outstanding sum. Despite this their contract was terminated.

A forcible eviction from the apartment was originally planned for October 2012. At that time about 150 friends and neighbours of the family assembled in front of the building and denied a bailiff access, thus preventing an eviction. Then, last Thursday the family was eventually evicted despite the renewed presence of several hundred supporters. The squad of 815 policemen used clubs and pepper spray to disperse protesters, although the bailiff, garbed in police uniform, had been easily able to gain access to the apartment by a side entrance.

Representatives of the Left Party took part in the protest in front of the house to demonstrate in a thoroughly hypocritical fashion their support for the most vulnerable layers of the population in Germany's capital city. Left Party deputy Halina Wawzyniak spoke of a demonstration of power on the part of the state against all those no longer willing to accept the eviction of low-income earners from their homes.

Left Party state leader Klaus Lederer distributed via Twitter a short statement which declared: "It has

become so blatant that we—with all our available forces—should make every eviction involving civil disobedience a symbol."

The representatives of the Left Party are evidently of the opinion that the population of Berlin suffers from amnesia. Between 2001 and 2011, the Left Party functioned as the coalition partner of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the Berlin state government, the Senate. The current housing shortage and rapidly rising rents are a direct result of the policies of that coalition.

When the coalition took power there were 200,000 empty standing apartments in Berlin, i.e., 18 percent of all housing stock. In the meantime this rate has fallen to 3 percent. The Senate deliberately pursued a policy of ghettoization, driving the poor out of specific districts and encouraging a kind of gold rush in which property sharks and speculators from home and abroad were able to make a killing. The head of the privatised, formerly municipal housing company, GSW, enthusiastically referred to the most dramatic rent and purchase price increases in twenty years.

On the other hand, increasing poverty and rising costs are forcing thousands of tenants to quit their familiar environment and find a cheaper apartment. The socially disadvantaged are being driven out of the inner city. In the suburb of Neukölln, which was regarded as poor ten years ago, rents have risen in some streets by up to 50 percent in the space of a year. Tenants who refuse to quit their homes are forcibly evicted.

The former Left Party-SPD Senate played a major role in driving up rents in the city's housing market. In 2004 the Senate sold off the state-owned housing company GSW to the investment bank Goldman Sachs and speculator Cerberus, thus handing them control of over 65,000 homes. The company is now listed on the stock exchange. In just one year, 2009, the new owners withdrew 445 million euros in capital from their

investment, while at the same time neglecting the modernization and maintenance of dwellings. The company is notorious for its rigorous measures against defaulting tenants.

In 2005 the Finance Senator at the time, Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), pressured the housing association centre (WBM) to sell off a further 35,000 publicly owned apartments. At the commencement of its period in power, the Left Party-SPD Senate rescued the bankrupt Berlin Bank Association with a cash injection of 1.7 billion euros and guaranteed investors deposits totalling 21.6 billion euros. It recouped this money, at least in part, by selling off the city's housing stock.

The lack of affordable housing is the inevitable result. The former Senate lacked any sort of meaningful urban development policy. The sale of urban land was made in each case to the highest bidder, and there was no local control regarding what was built. At the same time social projects and cultural institutions were closed down, together with many local libraries, swimming pools and recreational facilities for young people.

Recent studies have shown that workers in Berlin today have to spend 27.4 percent of their income on housing. Even in other expensive German cities, such as Hamburg, Frankfurt and Munich, tenants pay a smaller percentage of income for their housing. In addition to the rent increases additional housing costs have also soared, in particular following the privatization of the Berlin Water Company and energy companies.

The situation is particularly bleak for welfare recipients and refugees. Every year the Employment Agency in Berlin authorises around 1,200 evictions. The Berlin state poverty conference has warned of the increasing number of evictions and the increasing indebtedness of unemployed people unable to pay extortionate rents from their welfare payments.

For refugees, there is no chance of finding an apartment in Berlin. Their residency permits are limited and they are either banned from working or are only able to find the worst paid forms of employment. Most of them are herded together in shelters. In 2011, just 356 from a total of 2,425 asylum seekers were able to find some sort of home.

The rent index published by the Senate is also designed to drive up prices. It provides the framework

for tenants and landlords to stipulate rents and is a guide to judicial decisions regarding rent levels. When the index was drawn up it only took into account new contracts and rent increases made during the past four years. The index did not include earlier data from an earlier period when many tenants paid less rent.

In addition, the Senate has withdrawn state support for a large proportion of its remaining stock of social housing—28,000 of its former total of 170,000 housing units. This allows the new owners of the former public housing to demand rents far in excess of the levels prevailing in the surrounding area.

Following the federal reform of 2006, individual states are empowered to draw up their own legal foundations for social housing. This opportunity to regulate rents on behalf of tenants was ignored by the former Senate which patently failed to adopt any safeguards for tenants.



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