

Germany: Police brutality against Blockupy protesters in Frankfurt

Our correspondents
10 June 2013

The regional government in the state of Hesse mounted a massive police operation against the final day of demonstrations by “Blockupy” June 1. Parts of the banking sector of Frankfurt were completely sealed off, demonstrators were “kettled” until late into the evening and some were beaten and attacked with pepper spray.

Blockupy—a combination of the words occupy and blockade—refers to a European network, which in Frankfurt includes trade unions and NGOs like Attac, as well as other associations and organisations affiliated to the Left Party. Although the annual demonstrations are directed against the austerity policies of the European Central Bank (ECB), these groups are concerned only with securing a more comfortable position for themselves within the existing setup.

On June 1, roughly 10,000 people gathered on Baseler Platz, significantly fewer than last year. Shortly after midday, the march set off with drums and music on a route through the centre of the city to the ECB, headquartered in Frankfurt. From the outset, the march was accompanied on both sides by double columns of police.

There was a massive array of armed police officers in the banking centre, including the deployment of tank-like vehicles and water cannon. The police units came not only from Frankfurt, but were brought together from the other German states of Saxony, Baden Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia. Helicopters circled above the city to watch over developments and police filmed participants.

A large area around the ECB had already been sealed off the day before, and the underground station nearby was closed. On Saturday morning, there were protests against the EU’s crisis management in front of large banks and businesses in the shopping district and at

Frankfurt airport.

Although the route of the demonstration past the ECB had been approved in advance by a court, against the wishes of the state government, the police stopped the marchers as they reached the city’s theatre and prevented the demonstration from continuing. Police intervened to kettle 1,000 people, supposedly in order to arrest masked individuals from the “anti-capitalist bloc.”

The police allowed the rest of the demonstrators to move on and sought to record the personal details of all the detained protesters. A number of demonstrators who had not been kettled by the police demonstrated their solidarity with those who had and remained at the square.

Police dragged individuals out of the confined crowd in order to take their photographs and fingerprints and confirm their personal details. When pushing and shoving broke out, the police targeted young people for attack with pepper spray and batons. This brutal procedure lasted for up to nine hours.

Journalists also faced restrictions; some were pushed around and verbally abused and faced checks even though they clearly had media IDs.

At 10:30 in the evening, the police finally withdrew. They had arrested 45 people, and the Blockupy alliance estimated 200 were injured. Three-thousand angry demonstrators marched together in a protest to the central train station.

The regional government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the city authorities have set a dangerous precedent with their operations. The demonstration was legally authorised on several occasions, most recently at the Hesse Administrative Court in Kassel. Nonetheless, the police demonstrated their open contempt and disregard

for the court's decision.

The supposed reason for the police intervention, that "masked individuals had been prepared to employ violence" and that a few fireworks and paint bombs were thrown at the police, merely served as a pretext. It is well known that the so-called black bloc of protesters is a vehicle for state provocateurs.

The virtual banning of the demonstration by the police in Hesse is the high point of a sustained attack on the right to protest in Frankfurt. In May of last year, the city administration of the CDU and Greens banned all of the activities of Blockupy. The courts subsequently decided to allow a few protests, but only under very strict conditions. The municipal authorities then finally instructed the police in August to violently clear the camp of Blockupy activists, which had remained outside the ECB for 300 days.

Similar developments have taken place in other cities and regions. In 2006, the Social Democrat-Left Party administration in Berlin banned protests in support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which was under attack from Israel. One year later, Germany's Constitutional Court outlawed a protest march that was to have converged on the G8 conference.

The reaction of politicians from the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party is particularly cynical given this record. Even though they lead attacks on democratic rights whenever they are in power, especially on the right to freedom of assembly, they have sought to distance themselves from the actions of the police. Christian Heimpel, chair of the Social Democrats' youth organisation, even called for the resignation of the Hesse interior minister, Boris Rhein (CDU).

The police intervention was a serious attack on the basic democratic right of freedom to protest. The confining of peaceful demonstrators for hours on end in a police cordon was not the response of the state to supposed "acts of violence", but rather was an operation that had been prepared well in advance.

The target was not so much the organisers of the Blockupy protests, such as the Left Party, Social Democrats and Greens, who have themselves participated fully in the attacks on democratic rights. Rather, the measures served as a preparation for the coming social conflicts and were an attempt to intimidate all opposition.

The ruling elite knows full well that the sustained impoverishment of the population through their austerity policies will provoke opposition. Only a few days ago, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) warned that the global economic crisis would intensify social unrest in Europe. The risk of opposition motivated by economic conditions had risen sharply since the outbreak of the crisis in 2007 in the European Union in particular, the ILO noted.



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