

Munich police raid camp of refugees on hunger strike

Our reporters
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On Sunday morning, a large contingent of police forcibly broke up a hunger strike being carried out by 55 refugees in the Bavarian capital city of Munich. The hunger strike, which lasted a week, exposed the dire situation of refugees in Germany and the contemptuous attitude of the establishment political parties.

Police officers forced their way into the camp in Munich's cattle market and removed refugees, in some cases using brutal methods, according to a statement issued by the protesters. Some hunger strikers and their supporters were beaten by the police when they sat down to protest against the eviction. Supporters of the refugees, including the spokesman for the group, were arrested in the police action.

Prior to the police raid, the 55 asylum seekers had announced they would continue their hunger strike. On Friday, they issued a "final message" in which they made clear they were prepared to risk death in order to achieve their demands.

On Saturday evening, attempts by former Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chairman Hans-Jochen Vogel and former Christian Social Union (CSU) politician Alois Glück to persuade the refugees to give up their strike failed. State Premier Horst Seehofer (CSU) had backed the mediation attempt of the two politicians following a meeting in the state chancellery.

Vogel said the spokesperson for the asylum seekers had demanded immediate permanent residence permits. "I argued that this is an impossible demand," the SPD politician declared.

The refugees began their hunger strike a week ago. Last Tuesday, they decided to refuse all fluids. Their act of desperation was aimed at demanding the right to stay in Germany and in protest against the inhuman conditions facing asylum seekers.

Towards the end of last week, some two dozen

hunger strikers collapsed and were taken to nearby hospitals, some with serious kidney and lung problems. One asylum seeker had to be treated in an intensive care unit for acute heart problems. The majority of those admitted to hospital returned to the tent camp and continued their protest after treatment.

On Saturday night, some 30 protesters tried to enter the premises of West German Radio in Cologne in a demonstration of solidarity with the asylum seekers in Munich.

The eviction of the refugees' camp was predictable after it became clear that Bavarian Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann (CSU) advocated a hard line. Without directly addressing the hunger strike, he told *Focus* magazine that the Federal Republic must not "become more attractive for flows of international immigrants". Deportations should be vigorously implemented, he stressed, "because many rejected asylum seekers will not leave voluntarily."

Bavaria's minister for social affairs, Christine Haderthauer (CSU), cynically accused the refugees of seeking to "blackmail the lawful state to gain preferential asylum treatment." The chorus of denunciations of the refugees was joined by church representatives. Protestant Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm fumed: "No one is helped when we try to seek to bypass constitutional norms by means of pressure."

The mayor of Munich, Christian Ude (SPD), justified the forceful eviction of the camp as a move to save lives. He had already made clear last week that he would not accede to the demands of the hunger strikers. Ude condemned the spokesman for the refugees, Ashkan Khorasani, an Iranian, as a "relentless" radical and "strategist."

The CSU and SPD are united in pursuing a hard line against the refugees. Although Ude is the SPD's

candidate in September's federal election and is standing against the CSU, the rival candidates agreed that the plight of the refugees should not be a campaign issue.

The attitude of Ude shows the utter hypocrisy of the SPD on this question. At the same time that the mayor was closing ranks with the state premier against the refugees, the spokesperson for the SPD parliamentary group on integration policy, Isabell Zacharias, described Bavaria's asylum policy as "overflowing accommodation with intolerable hygienic conditions and inhumane living conditions, especially for families and refugee minors."

Last week, the authorities in Munich threatened to take away the two children of a mother participating in the hunger strike, accusing her of acting irresponsibly.

With their protest, the group of refugees from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria were seeking to secure decent conditions and protection from political persecution. Specifically, they demanded abolition of the obligation to reside in refugee camps and the requirement that they accept food parcels as the only form of support. They also demanded an end to the compulsory residence obligation, which restricts their freedom of movement. The fact that they were prepared to risk their health and lives makes clear how abominable their situation is in Germany and Europe.

According to the human rights organization Pro Asylum, Bavaria is the German state with the worst conditions for asylum seekers.

The protest in Munich coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the abolition of the right to asylum in Germany. On July 1, 1993, a new asylum law agreed by a cross-party coalition of the Christian Democratic Union, the Free Democratic Party and the SPD came into effect. It effectively ended the right of asylum, which had been anchored in the German post-World War II constitution. That document was influenced by the bitter lessons of the National Socialist (Nazi) regime.

On paper, the right to asylum continues to exist, but in practice it has become almost impossible for refugees to reach Germany to apply for asylum. Those who do make it to the country confront inhuman forms of harassment aimed at deterring all refugees.

In the past two decades, Germany has played the leading role in transforming Europe into an

impregnable fortress. Thousands of refugees have drowned attempting to enter Europe, and many others seeking to escape civil war, political persecution or abject poverty have lost their lives on European borders.

The core of the new asylum law is the so-called "third country" regulation, whereby a refugee can apply for asylum only in the so-called "safe" country he or she first entered. If the refugee travels on, he can be immediately sent back to that third country without any judicial process.

The provision mainly affects countries on the external borders of the EU, such as Greece, which have neither the resources nor the facilities to provide for refugees or grant them basic legal protections.

Only a small number of refugees are able to make it to Germany, which is located at the centre of the EU. Between January and May of this year, 34,419 refugees applied for asylum in Germany. The number permitted to stay averages less than 2 percent. About half of the applicants are immediately deported. Others receive a short-term residence permit, thereby delaying their deportation by a few months.

The situation of refugees has deteriorated in Germany and throughout Europe in recent years. Many thousands of people are denied access to Europe and the right to apply for asylum. The plight of the refugees is being used to enhance the powers of European states and prepare for the suppression of social protest.



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