Asylum seekers in Berlin on hunger strike

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For the past week the German media and politicians from all the main political parties have shed crocodile tears over the tragic deaths of hundreds of refugees off the Italian coast.

In reality, refugees who do manage to cross Europe's external borders and reach Germany face indifference from political parties and hostility from the authorities. Several dozen asylum seekers in Berlin began an indefinite hunger strike last Wednesday to protest Germany's inhumane asylum policy. They have declared they are prepared to sacrifice their lives should the German government fail to respond. They had originally commenced their protest with marches and hunger strikes this summer in the state of Bavaria.

The Bavarian State responded by trying to intimidate the protesters with a massive police presence. A number of the asylum seekers sought refuge in the headquarters of the German trade unions (DGB) in Munich. The union bureaucrats made clear they were unwelcome, with Bavarian DGB leader Matthias Jena called upon them to leave the premises.

The asylum seekers then made their way to Berlin. An earlier camp and hunger strike at the Brandenburg Gate was forcibly dismantled by police. A further tent camp of up to 200 refugees was established in the Berlin suburb of Kreuzberg by many African refugees who came to Europe via Lampedusa. They are considered illegal and are threatened with deportation. There are no showers or kitchens in the camp and food is in short supply.

The suburb of Kreuzberg is governed by an administration led by the Green Party. The Green mayor for Kreuzberg had declared that no more camps will be tolerated, and has proposed the refugees be removed into a building or barracks in the suburb. The Green mayor's stance is cynical in the extreme. The local council has said that no alternative housing is available, though Germany's capital is full of newly built properties standing empty, which could be used for such a purpose.

WSWS reporters spoke with Sibtain N. from Pakistan and Hamed R. from Iran. They are members of the group of 30 immigrants and refugees, including two women, who commenced a hunger strike at Germany's historic Brandenburg Gate last Wednesday. Members of the group come from various countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Congo, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone.

Sibtain and Hamed related their experiences at the hands of the German authorities since traveling to Germany around one year ago.

Sibtain, 32, related that he travelled by plane from Pakistan to Munich one year ago. He faced political persecution in Pakistan and upon landing in Munich applied to the German authorities for political asylum.

For his first two months in Germany, Sibtain was initially confined to a camp in Munich with around 100 other refugees. According to German immigration law, applicants for asylum like Sibtain are not permitted to work. They must also remain at all times within 20 kilometres of their place of confinement. Their only means of survival is through a system of food vouchers or food packages, which dictates what the refugees should buy and eat.

After two months in Munich, having heard nothing about his asylum application, Sibtain was transferred to another camp in a small village in Bavaria where he was held for another eight months.

He said, "There was nothing to do in the village. There was no supermarket in the immediate area, which meant we had to travel long distances to hand in our vouchers. We had no opportunity to educate or improve ourselves. This applied also to families with children. There was no provision made for medical care… we had no access to a doctor. When I applied to the state office to receive information about my application for asylum,

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I received no answer. It was clear that the authorities had no interest in us and our plight.

“To protest about our treatment and the failure of the authorities to give us any information I joined with other refugees in Munich and we began a hunger strike last June, which lasted for 9 days. We also undertook protest marches from the cities of Würzburg and Bayreuth to Munich, walking around 300 km.

“My experience here makes clear that the German authorities have absolutely no sympathy for the rights of refugees. The EU (Dublin II) agreement on refugees, which creates a barrier to immigrants trying to get to central Europe, means that many make the hazardous journey by sea to countries like Italy and Greece. These countries are already in economic crisis. Instead of welcoming us and allowing us to work, however, they want to deport us. I cannot understand this…

"Many of the refugees come from countries like Syria, Libya, Iran, Afghanistan, and my own country, which are in state of virtual civil war due to NATO and Western aggression. Countries such as Germany are quite prepared to sell weapons to these countries, but when the consequences are war and persecution, they wash their hands of the refugees. I will stay here and continue the hunger strike until the German government responds. I am ready to sacrifice my life is necessary to achieve our demands…"

Sibtain's comments on the role of western nations in fomenting conflicts abroad were substantiated by Hamed, who is also participating in the hunger strike and had also taken part in the earlier hunger strike in Munich.

Hamed is 23 years old and following one year at university was forced to flee Iran fearing political repression. “I arrived in Germany at the start of 2012. I did not come here because I wanted a ‘better life,’ I came here because I feared for my life in Iran. Like all of the refugees here, I do not want to be dependent on handouts. I want to work and to learn. There are people here, some more educated, some less so, who can all make a contribution to German society, but all we get from the German authorities is indifference and ignorance.

“The West and America are quite prepared to sell weapons to repressive regimes but then refuse to take any responsibility for the consequences. Everybody knows that the police in Iran are armed with German weapons—the pepper spray, the weapons, police vehicles all have German brand names on them.

“I know of fellow students who have suffered persecution from the Iranian state which has spied on them using surveillance equipment from German companies such as Siemens.

“In a sense Germany played a role in forcing me to leave my country, but now I am here it wants nothing to do with me.”

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