

Refugees in Berlin call off hunger strike

Our correspondents
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Around two dozen refugees have been on hunger strike for 11 days, protesting at Berlin's central Brandenburg Gate against inhumane living conditions. Over the last five days they have also refused water. Then on Saturday evening they ended the strike temporarily, without receiving any concessions from the federal government or the Berlin state Senate.

The refugees have called off their hunger strike until the middle of January. They previously held talks with Dilek Kolat, senator for integration in the Berlin senate and a member of the Social Democrats (SPD), Rüdiger Veit, the SPD's spokesman on integration in the federal parliament, as well as the federal migration and refugee board.

The politicians waited until the last moment before meeting with the refugees. Many of the hunger strikers had collapsed and had been taken to hospital, where they still refused liquids and food. Because the police had banned them from using tents, tarpaulins and mats the refugees cowered on small polystyrene squares, protected from the heavy rain only by umbrellas. Only after some time were some blankets and sleeping bags allowed.

The representatives of the Senate and the federal government refused to make any concessions to the refugees. They merely stated that the asylum applications of those concerned would be quickly reviewed. The SPD also asserted that they would raise the plight of the refugees in coalition talks to form a new government with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The refugees called for the right to remain in Germany for the whole group for an unlimited time, the abolition of the residence condition for asylum seekers, which prevents them from leaving the local area to which they have been assigned, and an improvement in their living conditions. A few hours before they broke off the hunger strike, the WSWS spoke with the

refugees.

"We are human beings, but we are not allowed to live like humans," said Jalilian Mohamed from Iran. "We are permanently in fear of deportation, have no right to work or right to reside. We have to live off food parcels and live in homes. It is torture in the homes. We are on hunger strike on the streets because we want to be free."

The 34-year-old had been taken to hospital twice, but continued his resistance. "All of my applications were rejected," he said. "And I will only be allowed to stay for a further three months. I fear deportation at any time. I took a German course for four months. I passed a basic course, but I can't take a further course because I am only allowed to temporarily stay here."

"We all have the same stories," said 28-year-old Elsa, who left Ethiopia as a youth due to political persecution. "I came to Germany two years ago. At first I was in an asylum home near Passau. It was horrible. At least four people slept in one room. We weren't allowed to work. We sat there for two years, in the same place. I never got an answer to my application for asylum."

Elsa said she was taking part in the strike because she wanted to be accepted as a human being. "We want to learn the language and work", she said. "Of course we are putting ourselves at risk of death, but in a home you die as well, you die internally, because you can't do anything."

Elsa worked for six years in Greece looking after children and as a waitress. With the onset of the crisis, however, opportunities for work there had disappeared. Therefore she had travelled to Germany, where she now confronts deportation.

Hussein, 35, from Pakistan, also initially found refuge in Greece. He fled Pakistan due to political persecution and lived for 10 years in southern Europe. He speaks Greek very well and he had begun to feel happy there.

But then the attacks of the police and extreme right on immigrants increased.

“I left Greece because the attacks of the police and Golden Dawn were increasing. I was attacked three times. We feared leaving the house and it was not possible to go shopping safely,” Hussein said.

The European Union (EU) supports Greece in its witch-hunting of immigrants, and has been demanding stronger action against “illegal” refugees for years. In the framework of operation Xinios Zeus, tens of thousands of foreign-looking people on the streets of Greece have been arrested, checked and locked up in deportation camps. These actions have been backed by fascist shock troops.

In Germany, Hussein has had similar experiences, like many of the refugees. “Whoever is rich can travel without any problem and receives a friendly welcome everywhere,” he said. “But if you are poor, you are not treated like a human being.”

Forced out of Libya by the NATO war

While the protest at the Brandenburg gate has come to an end, there are still dozens of immigrants at an improvised camp on the Oranienplatz in Berlin. Having spent more than a year in tents, these refugees have now been offered accommodation, according to an announcement from the state administration made up of the CDU and SPD, and the local mayor, the Green Party’s Monika Herrmann. However, a suitable property is yet to be found.

WSWS reporters spoke with Ahmed Saliku, a young electrician from Nigeria, who has been living in the tent camp. He fled his home country in 2009, after sharp conflicts broke out between Christians and Muslims, which resulted in the brutal killings of hundreds of people.

Ahmed made his way to Libya, where he found work for Gama, a large Turkish building company that operated several major projects. He worked there for eight months in 2010 in his chosen profession and made Libya his second home.

But with the beginning of the civil war and the attack by NATO in early 2011, this was over. “As foreigners,

we were threatened by the rebels and we were in danger,” Ahmed reported. “Anyone who fell into the hands of the rebels had to fear for their life. The army brought us to a military camp. I spent a week there. We were given the choice of either fighting with the Libyan army against the rebels or leaving the country.”

Ahmed decided to leave and ended up on a severely overcrowded ship with 800 other refugees, which arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa after a two-day trip across the Mediterranean. He said that the people on Lampedusa had made great efforts to help them, but apart from handouts, there was no perspective. Although they were allowed to stay in the country as provided for by EU law, there were no legal opportunities to work.

According to Ahmed, the Berlusconi government gave him and several others €500 so that they would leave the country. He showed us the bill, on which he had confirmed receipt of the money. “Almost everyone here has a similar piece of paper,” he stated. The refugees reached other European countries, but they now had no legal status.

Ahmed felt that in Libya, the EU had destroyed the work of generations, particularly at the insistence of Sarkozy, who was French president at the time, and Britain’s prime minister, David Cameron. That had not only affected Libya, but thousands of other Africans who had worked there. “Europe is responsible for the situation. They caused the war and destroyed our home; now they are not giving us an alternative. Libya was a refuge for many people in Africa,” he said.

The fate of the African refugees from Libya is a devastating indictment of all of the German political parties. While Germany abstained from participating in the Libyan war for tactical reasons, all of the parties, from the CDU to the SPD, Greens and Left Party, have come out without exception in support of a more aggressive course in German foreign policy. They do not intend to remain on the sidelines when the proceeds from new colonial wars are shared out.



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