

German universities threatened with spending cuts

Phillip Frische
5 December 2013

Higher education institutions in Germany are facing drastic budget cuts. At universities mainly in the former East Germany, millions of euros in savings are to be made. In this region, universities in Jena, Halle (Saale) and Leipzig are the main institutions affected by cost-cutting plans.

However, there are also major cost-cutting plans at universities in Saarbrücken, Würzburg and Bremen.

Conditions at universities are already catastrophic. Students struggle with overcrowded lecture halls, while the majority of tutors are badly paid and only have fixed-term jobs. Despite this, further cuts are to be made at universities.

The immediate background to the austerity policies of Germany's state governments is the "debt brake," which was inserted into Germany's constitution in 2009 and subsequently all state constitutions. It states that all debt from Germany's states (Bundesländer) must be eliminated by 2020. By 2016, the federal government must cut its structural deficit to 0.35 percent of GDP. A council of stability is then to oversee the federal budget and those of the states and enforce restructuring measures when required.

The debt brake is the mechanism through which massive cuts to education have already been organised. Plans for the implementation of the cuts are currently being worked out in strategy papers being discussed between the leaderships of universities and the relevant state governments. Several thousand jobs are under threat nationally, including entire subject departments.

In Thüringen, 300 jobs are to be cut according to the *Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung*, including 50 professors, in order to make a budget reduction of 10 percent. Particularly severe cuts are planned at the Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena. Five courses have already been cut or are to be eliminated. According to

an internal paper seen by the *Thüringer Allgemeine*, a further two courses are "under review."

A "structure and development plan" adopted by the university's senate on 15 October proposes the cutting of 125 full-time jobs, in order to balance a structural deficit of €7.3 million. Since a significant number of university jobs are part-time, many more than 125 people will be affected by this. There will be cuts to administration, scientific personnel and professors. A total of 30 professorships will be eliminated, in courses such as economic and cultural history, general pedagogy and political theory.

At Weimar University, around 60 jobs are to be cut. The Bauhaus University has already submitted a plan to this effect to the Thüringen ministry of education, science and culture. It plans to cut 12 professorships, equating to one in seven posts. Culture minister Christoph Matschie of the Social Democrats (SPD) stated that in line with the development plans running until 2020, universities had to "also take unpopular decisions."

Similar scenarios are being played out in other states. The state government in Saxony-Anhalt, which is a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD as in Thüringen, intends to make €50 million in cuts by 2025. According to a report in the *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, university directors have initially suggested to the state government that they will cut €5 million annually between 2015 and 2019.

Concrete cost saving plans are taking shape. The board of management for the university clinic and the medical faculty have adopted a rigid austerity programme until 2025. Operational and personnel costs are to be reduced and entire areas shut down, including the reproductive medical centre, medical law, environmental toxicology, hygiene, microbiology and

pharmacology.

Over 1,000 jobs are to go in Saxony by 2020. The University of Leipzig alone is to make 24 redundancies each year. The university agreed to a strategy paper on the planned cuts, which identified 48 job cuts to be made in 2013 and 2014. Among other cuts, the pharmacy course, the only one in Saxony, faces closure. The dismantling of the institute will see the loss of 21 jobs and five professorships.

In Saarland, the university of Saarbrücken has agreed cuts totalling €140 million by 2020 with the CDU/SPD state government. With the university's annual budget of €150 million, this will be implemented through the destruction of a large number of jobs and the closure of significant parts of the institution.

The most dramatic attacks on education are in Brandenburg, where a state government of the Left Party and SPD has been in power since 2009. In its budget for 2013 and 2014 adopted in December 2012, the Left Party/SPD slashed education spending. They cut €12 million from higher education institutions, €13 million from publicly-funded schools and €4.3 million from free schools.

In line with the cuts and structural changes, the Cottbus University and the Lausitz specialist higher education institute were brought together. While students and scientists marched through the city centre dressed in black and organised a funeral parade, the Left Party/SPD state government described the merger as a "forward-looking project for a new type of institution."

The Left Party is playing a leading role in the imposition of cuts in education. More than any other party, they are attempting to sell the spending cuts and restructuring as forward-looking and progressive in order to dissipate the opposition to these measures. In reality, behind their social phrases, the attacks are no different to the policies of the other official parties.

Helmut Markov of the Left Party, the finance minister in the Left Party/SPD state government in Brandenburg, is planning to take on no new debt in the 2014 budget for the first time in order to enforce the debt brake. In Saxony, the Left Party's parliamentary fraction, which is in opposition, spoke out in favour of the insertion of the debt brake into the state constitution.

All of the parties from the CDU/CSU (Christian

Social Union) to the Left Party are in complete agreement with the placing of the full burden of the crisis on the population.

The cuts to education spending are part of the austerity policies across Europe. Since the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, governments have slashed spending at universities in particular, in order to recoup the billions in bailouts for the banks. In Britain, the total budget for science fell from around €11 billion in 2010 to €9 billion in 2013. The Czech government cut spending on higher education institutions between 2008 and 2012 by 14 percent. In Hungary 20 percent of education spending has been cut, and in Greece it is even higher at 25 percent.

This policy is now to be intensified. Structural reforms to improve competitiveness and a strict, sustainable budget on a European level are at the heart of the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD. This fully applies to education policy in Germany. While a long overdue increase in financial support for students (Bafög) was removed from the text of the agreement, under the rubric of "initiative for excellence" the reform of education in the interests of business is to be continued.

In this way, the catastrophic learning conditions for students and the precarious and badly paid working conditions for scientific personnel and support staff will be consolidated. It states in the coalition agreement that "temporary working relations result from the nature of the scientific sector, based on fixed-term research projects and other subject-specific reasons."



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact