

Protests against cuts at Berlin's Humboldt University

Our correspondents
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About a thousand students took part in a General Assembly at Humboldt University (HU) last Thursday to protest against impending job cuts at the second largest university in Berlin.

The General Assembly was the largest such event for several years. The university's largest hall was full to capacity, with students forced to sit on the floor or stand in the aisles. Many were worried about the prospect of a deterioration in the quality of their courses, with overcrowded seminars, or the withdrawal of courses.

The precarious situation of the academic staff was discussed. Numerous speeches drew attention to the miserable pay and the constant overloading of the non-professorial teaching staff, and in favour of broad solidarity action. Anger was provoked by the fact that on the one hand, HU is part of the government's "Excellence Initiative" and is particularly promoted as an "elite university", but on the other hand, cuts are to be made in administrative personnel and teaching staff.

So far, few details are known about specific cuts at individual faculties. What is clear, however, is that savings are to be made particularly among the non-professorial teaching staff. Marina Frost, vice president with responsibility for the budget at Humboldt University, had recently spoken of a "dramatic gulf" between the required and actual resources available for the personnel budget. Fixed-term contracts will be allowed to expire and will not be filled by new staff, which is equivalent to a wave of layoffs.

According to the HU Staff Council, a third of the 1,000 staff funded through the general budget could be affected by such a hiring freeze. The university presidium (management) has not responded to requests by student representatives for exact figures. For this reason, the call went out from the assembly for students

to gather information to provide a better picture of the situation.

The nine demands agreed by the General Assembly rarely exceed the immediate situation at the university. They are directed at the university presidium and call for greater transparency in budgetary planning, creating regular conditions of employment for teaching staff, but also for free access to the university. All the demands were previously prepared by the student council and the lecturers' council, and were presented to the General Assembly.

Even if there is evidence of miscalculations in the HU budget, the main responsibility for the poor situation at the university is borne by the Christian Democrat Berlin Senate (state executive) and its SPD-Left Party predecessor.

In their 10-year reign from 2001 to 2011, the SPD and the Left Party implemented an austerity programme for the Berlin universities amounting to €75 million. At the same time, annual cost increases, such as for the energy supply, personnel and pensions, were not compensated for 10 years via the university contracts with the state of Berlin. For this reason, the universities accumulated new deficits from year to year, which were met through imposing wage cuts and job losses.

As is now being planned for HU, the other two major Berlin universities have also been pushing through job cuts for some time. According to *Tagesspiegel*, it is common practice at the Technical University (TU) to leave teaching staff vacancies unfilled for three to four months in order to save costs. Despite this, there is fierce competition for these poorly paid jobs because they are usually the only springboard for a further academic career.

Similar cuts are being threatened in many other federal states. While the study conditions for the

majority of students are getting worse, a narrow layer of universities involved in the Excellence Initiatives and other flagship projects are able to benefit. This social selection is part of a comprehensive attack.

The situation is devastating across Europe, especially in Greece. The social desolation of Greece organised by the European Union has led to youth unemployment of over 60 percent. Many universities have had to close.

In Berlin, the savings in education spending have long been associated with wage cuts and social attacks in other areas. The Senate introduced a new austerity budget in December that provides for further reductions to meet the debt ceiling adopted by the grand coalition headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel following the bailout of the banks.



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