

German IYSSE defends freedom of speech at Humboldt University

Our correspondent
15 October 2014

The administration at Humboldt University in Berlin has sought to censor a meeting called by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on the topic “Why Do the German Elites Again Want War?”. The IYSSE originally sent a letter, dated October 8, protesting undemocratic restraints on freedom of speech imposed by the university administration as a condition for obtaining a lecture room.

The IYSSE received a response cited below on October 10 from the university spokesperson, Hans-Christoph Keller. The reply of the IYSSE, dated October 13, is also cited below.

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Berlin, 10 October

On behalf of the university administration, I would like to reply to your letter.

It is a self-evident prerequisite--and achievement of our university--that diversity of opinion is a precious commodity and that differences of opinion be discussed with scientific arguments, free of personal disparagement.

If you agree to these principles, I see no problem in allocating a room to the constituted student body and to yourself.

I look forward to your response,

Regards,
HC Keller

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Berlin, 13 October

Dear Prof. Dr. Olbertz, Mr Keller,

Thank you for your letter of October 10. We now assume that our meeting can take place on October 23.

However, we want to reaffirm that the International Youth and Students For Social Equality (IYSSE) has never held a meeting at Humboldt University that in

any way violated the academic principles of a university. Your demand that we explicitly agree to these principles presumes that we have violated them at some previous time.

In your letter of October 7 you refer to an IYSSE meeting in July at which “members of the University” were allegedly “maligned” or “insulted”. You fail to provide any substantiation for this allegation.

We have never either “maligned” or “insulted” members of the university. We do insist, however, on our right to criticize and condemn political positions publicly put forward by members of the university. If someone does not agree with this criticism--even if he or she holds a senior academic position--this does not mean that our criticism constitutes “defamation” or an “insult”. These terms have a specific legal significance and should not be used lightly.

We wish to remind you that Humboldt University has previously sought to discredit the IYSSE with utterly baseless assertions. In October 2010, we invited the internationally renowned historian Alexander Rabinowitch from the University of Indiana to give a lecture. The Chair for the History of Eastern Europe refused to officially receive Professor Rabinowitch, and no other member of the Institute was prepared to welcome him. The room allocated for his lecture was far removed from the main building and difficult to get to. Nevertheless, the lecture was attended by more than 400 people. The English edition of *Spiegel Online* provided a detailed report on the event.

The day after the meeting, we received a letter from the Technical Department of Humboldt University that referred to the event as “an uneasy, tense meeting”. The letter declared that the university reserved the right “to undertake criminal charges for breach of the peace.” It emerged that the claim and accompanying

threat were completely baseless. The university itself had to admit this. A letter from the university dated October 14, 2010 stated: “As a result, it should be noted that the terms ‘uneasy’ and ‘tense’ must be qualified... The Department considers the matter closed.”

We regard the recent allegations and insinuations to be a repetition of the methods from four years ago. The university is employing baseless allegations in an attempt to discredit individuals and organizations whose views do not coincide with those of the Chair for the History of Eastern Europe. In so doing, the university administration is disregarding the very academic principles it demands that others respect.

We call upon you to refrain from any further attempts to restrict our fundamental right to freedom of expression.

Yours respectfully,

The university group of the IYSSE at Humboldt University, Berlin



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