

Demonstrators condemn brutal treatment of refugees in Berlin, Germany

Our correspondents
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Around a thousand people took part in a rally last Saturday, organised by the refugee aid group “Moabit helps,” to protest the abysmal treatment of refugees arriving in the city of Berlin.

Displaying placards with slogans such as “Registration instead of freezing” and “Winter is coming, against lethal freezing in queues,” demonstrators expressed their anger at the indifference and bureaucratic arrogance with which the Berlin government is treating refugees.

In a number of speeches volunteers described the catastrophic and shocking conditions at the Berlin State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo), a refugee processing centre in Berlin’s Moabit neighbourhood. One of the first speakers said it was only due to the tireless work of volunteers that no one had died during the past three months.

She described the situation: “Since mid-July between 500 and 1500 refugees have been waiting to get numbers and begin initial reception procedures. The period between drawing a number and receiving an interview with the authority is around 57 days.”

This reality is the result of years of neglect on the part of politicians, declared the spokeswoman for the Berlin Refugee Council, Marina Mauer. She stressed: “Recent decisions aimed at tightening up asylum law give the impression that the main concern of the federal government as well as the government of Berlin is not to enable genuine integration but merely to harass and deter refugees.”

Yousef Alkhatib, a refugee from Syria, spoke about the horrors of war in his home city of Aleppo. He then described the bureaucratic jungle in Berlin and thanked the volunteers who helped him and others to deal with harassment by the authorities and exploitation by hostels and private companies.

At the conclusion of the rally, Dr. Günther Jonitz, the President of the Berlin Medical Association, gave a moving speech. Every day six doctors, four nurses and four midwives volunteer to provide health care for unregistered refugees at LaGeSo. Every day they take care of up to 200 refugees, some of them working 40 hours a week. There are no full-time doctors at the centre.

Jonitz harshly criticised the Berlin Senate administration and accused it of sabotage. The prevailing bureaucratic harassment and failure to provide medical care at LaGeSo was potentially life-threatening. He said it was hard to “keep the lid on” his anger and bewilderment.

He thanked the many volunteer doctors and nurses who work tirelessly for the refugees, and emphasised: “We are talking about something that is more important than medical care and assistance to refugees. It is about the very foundations of our society. It’s about humanism and human rights.”

Amid cheers and applause, Jonitz declared: “The foundation of our society is humanism, not capitalism!”

A WSWs reporting team spoke with many participants about the outrageous situation in Berlin, as well as the relationship between the behaviour of the authorities and the growth of militarism in Germany.

The phrase “Enough is enough” was hand painted on the placard of social worker Figen (42), and her two children Beria (12) and Eslem (10). She said they came to the rally because it is important to help people fleeing war. Beria added, “And because no one should be treated in such a way.” Her school, the Friedrich Engels Gymnasium, had established its own welcome class for refugee children.

Figen currently carries out a great deal of work accommodating refugees. She stressed: “Formerly,

when many refugees arrived in Turkey, Germany wagged its finger at Turkey and accused it of infringing on human rights. But the way in which refugees are treated here and the fact that they can wait up to two months until they make an initial application is inhumane. This cannot and must not be the case in Europe.”

Sandra Meisel (45), a Berlin photographer and artist, has already made donations to LaGeSo in Moabit, where she lives. She angrily denounced the conditions there: “Berlin holds its parties, the Love Parade, celebrations for footballers and other events, which are always very efficient and well organized. But now apparently the city is unable to set up 50 heated tents?”

Sandra said she was delighted that so many young people were taking part in the rally. “The average age here is 25. I think it is great that so many young people are participating in such a conscious manner.”

The media, she complained, tended to ignore such demonstrations. “What I find so bad is that only the right-wing Pegida demonstrations have such large coverage in the media. If the protesters are leftist, then the media disappears.” When asked about German foreign policy, she said, “The refugees all come from countries where Germany delivers weapons.”

A number of refugees took part in the rally. Ahmad (22), Karam (18) from Syria, and Nabih (18) and Roneg (18) have been through an ordeal. They came to Germany a year ago. Their journey involving a perilous boat trip across the Mediterranean to Italy or Greece, from there, via the Balkans to Munich and Berlin. “It took me 25 days,” said the Palestinian youth Nabih. They were forced to leave their families because of the intensification of war and the lack of any prospects for the future.

“We have seen what has happened in Iraq and Libya,” said Ahmad, who had begun to study engineering in Damascus and wants to continue his studies in Germany. When questioned on the activities of American and European imperialism, he noted bitterly, “The US and Europe used Saudi Arabia and Qatar to arm the terrorists of Al-Nusra, who cooperate with Al Qaeda.” Nabih added, “And Turkey supports the IS with money.” What is portrayed as a fight against terrorism is in reality “the arming of the terrorists” by the great powers.

Tina (31) attended the rally with her boyfriend, who

came to Germany from Morocco about five years ago. Tina regarded the manner in which migrants were treated in LaGeSo as a “disgrace to the capital.” There were so many projects for which money is spent pointlessly, but nothing is made available for the “poorest.” Her friend nodded and complained that so much money was devoted to “the military and the armed forces.”

Franziska (55) said she has always thought a country like Germany was “relatively open.” Now she is “shocked” about the conditions at LaGeSo. The politicians responsible for the terrible treatment in Berlin should resign, she said. She was especially shocked by racist incitement against refugees by politicians such as CSU leader Horst Seehofer. She expressed her sympathy for asylum seekers: “The refugees face all the rigours of their flight in order to provide a better life for their families.”

Harald Riese (75) is an organist and came to the demonstration by chance. He saw the rally from the bus he was travelling on to visit his aunt. He is involved in a refugee aid initiative he co-founded in his hometown of Heilsbronn. Among other assistance, he gives the young refugees guitar lessons.

Even in the small town of Heilsbronn the refugees could count on great support from the public, he said. For their part, the authorities only make things more difficult. “The 3,000 inhabitants of our village wanted to accommodate refugees in 63 apartments, but the district administration was opposed and instead advocated a container village for 200 refugees they want to build outside the city. Why? Because they want to keep them under control, they want to demonstrate their power!”



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