

Thousands of refugees crammed into airport hangars in Berlin, Germany

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The Berlin city administration is housing refugees fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq in inhumane conditions at the abandoned Berlin-Tempelhof airport.

Tents and habitable shipping containers are being set up in aircraft hangars as close together as possible. Since the end of October, approximately 2,200 refugees have been quartered in three of the seven hangars. According to recent announcements from Berlin Mayor Michael Müller (Social Democratic Party, SPD), more hangars will be used to provide accommodation for up to 6,000 refugees.

The site is a gloomy place, cold and inhospitable. The entrances to the hangars are halfway underground and unobservable from the street. They are found on a path leading through a narrow underpass. Beyond the entryways, an oppressive feeling assails the visitor as though he were entering a strange, bygone world. To the left and right stand old, yellow-grey walls, cross-barred and factory windows, with stairs leading to air force depots where armaments were once stored.

The site is shielded from the housing blocks of the city's population and the popular Tempelhof Field recreation area. The headquarters of the Berlin police are on the western side and the former barracks of the Prussian Guard Cuirassier Regiment, today used by various police departments, lie on the northern side.

Here one also encounters a memorial dedicated to the victims of Columbia House, which stood on the airport grounds until 1938. This was a notorious Gestapo prison beginning in 1933 and from 1934 served as an SS concentration camp, where thousands of communists, social democrats, trade unionists and left-wing intellectuals were tortured to death. Concentration camp thugs like Karl Otto Koch, who later became commander of the death camps at Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Lublin-Majdanek, received their "training" here.

In the course of the airport's construction, begun in 1936, the Nazi regime decided not to use it for flight operations, but for production of armaments. In addition to the hangars, barracks were also erected for thousands of forced labourers from occupied Europe. After the war, the airport became famous for its part in the Berlin Airlift, the Allies' Cold War operation, and later served as the capital city's airfield for smaller aircraft until 2008.

Police used as "refugee managers"

Last September, the Berlin Senate approved the use of the airport for housing refugees. Social Affairs Senator Mario Czaja (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and managing director of Tempelhof Projekt GmbH Holger Lippmann (CDU) defended accommodation in the bleak hangars on the humanitarian grounds that refugees needed first and foremost a roof over their heads, and the airport was supposedly better

than being left under the open skies.

Refugee spokesman for the Berlin Pirates Party Fabio Reinhardt told the *World Socialist Web Site* that his Senate faction had long been drawing attention to vacant public buildings that offered far more humane conditions for refugees and could also later be used for other public purposes. Reinhardt alluded to the Berlin Young Writers' Youth Hostel near the Jewish Museum in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, an old police station in the same region, and an empty office building in Spandau. The Senate, however, refused to condone the renovation and provision of these premises for housing refugees.

The Senate arranged for the construction of accommodation in the hangars by commissioning Tamaja Social Services GmbH, formerly SOWO GmbH, a private company that operates two refugee shelters in Berlin. SOWO made headlines late last year because one of its shareholders was former undersecretary of social affairs and head of CDU Neukölln district Michael Büge, who was forced to resign from the Senate due to exposure of his membership in the far-right Gothia student fraternity.

The Berlin Senate has kept the management of the Tempelhof Airport in its own hands. The "Coordination Staff for Refugee Management," set up in August, engaged as a project manager Klaus Keese (CDU), the former head of the police force's Section I and rival for the post of chief of police. He was called out of retirement to participate in the project, as was former police chief Dieter Glietsch (SPD), who now acts as Secretary of State for Refugees.

Other police officers are also active in the "coordinating staff," a fact that exposes the Senate's attitude to the refugees. Its goal is not to provide humane living conditions, but to establish centralized, bureaucratic police control of the growing number of asylum seekers.

Senate appointees are also cooperating with head of Tempelhof Projekt GmbH Holger Lippmann, who was also a former leading Senate official and known as Berlin's "moneymaker." In his long-standing role as head of real estate funding, he ensured that public land and buildings were privatized, which made him substantially responsible for the city's deplorable lack of public accommodation.

Living in hangars

On November 12, Tamaja GmbH's public relations division allowed this reporter and other journalists to inspect a hangar. Subsequent media reports emphasized the neatly erected tents and admirable efforts of Bundeswehr (German armed forces) soldiers setting up beds.

On November 11, the Senate press office curtly replied to an inquiry from the WSW, stating there were "no plans for another meeting with the press in Tempelhof." On the same day, employees of the SGB security

firm on the site and staff of Tamaja denied entry to WSWs reporters on the grounds that they wanted to protect the “privacy” of refugees—an assertion that reeks of cynicism given the Berlin authorities’ practices with respect to accommodating refugees.

For months, the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo) has been treading underfoot the “privacy” and human dignity of refugees. Refugees had to and still have to stand for days in intolerable conditions to get numbered waiting-tickets, spend nights in unheated tents, and languish for the rest of the time in overcrowded hostels. While the population’s solidarity with the refugees has been overwhelming, people seeking asylum from war-torn countries have experienced nothing but bureaucratic harassment from the Senate authorities.

Tensions are mounting in the huge hangars at the now-defunct Berlin-Tempelhof airport. While hardly any sun manages to penetrate the high latticed windows, large lights attached to the steel ceiling construction spread their cold, diffuse light.

The tents are crammed against each other in Hangar 1. This is the first hangar to be arranged as a shelter for refugees. About 650 people are now living here. Each tent holds 12 people who sleep on bunk beds, which were set up by the Bundeswehr soldiers on October 24.

Hangars 3 and 4 are also now fully occupied by 700 or 800 people respectively, although these refugees live not in tents but in roofless residential units. Ten people are packed into each of the cabins here. At first sight, Hangar 4 looks quite attractive, bright and clean—rather like a cluster of mobile homes. From above, however, the accommodation is revealed to be a grid of boxes in which people are to be stored like commodities.

Among the tents and camp cabins sit dazed-looking old people and women with small children, whose experience of war and flight is written on their faces. At lunchtime, hundreds of asylum seekers are obviously still away from Tempelhof at the registries at the LaGeSo or in the Bundesallee. Some young people sit in a circle on the floor near an electric power supply, where they can access the Internet and try to make contact with the outside world on their cell phones.

A queue of women and children forms on the side of the fenced-in forecourt facing Tempelhof Field. Aid workers from Save the Children have set up a table displaying donations of children’s clothing at the entrance to the hangar. Fifteen minutes later, the table is almost bare. The refugees often arrive in Germany with only a plastic bag. Many have thrown their belongings overboard to prevent their boat from sinking during their perilous crossing of the Mediterranean.

“We have a lot of voluntary helpers,” says Gisan Eza, who conducts us around the hangar on behalf of Tamaja GmbH. In fact, if these volunteers were not available, the private operators of accommodation services in Berlin would hardly be able to manage the housing of refugees and the necessary support services, such as childcare, German lessons and help with hospital and doctor visits. Berlin charities report that some 22,000 volunteers are now working in the various sites of accommodation.

The Senate pays the private companies only for the housing, sanitation and supply of food. It is therefore no wonder that some private firms exploit the Senate’s refugee budget package to reap big profits while providing as little service as possible. One newspaper recently observed that a “gold rush” mentality currently prevails among manufacturers of housing containers and operators of private lodging.

Tamaja employee Gisan Eza stresses, however, that her employers are very concerned about the refugees. She says the company is treating the refugees humanely, noting that the refugees are driven by bus to nearby swimming pools and sports gymnasiums to shower.

well here either”

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of refugees about their experiences outside the hangars.

Thirty-year-old Ahmar fled from Syria with his young wife and two small children, after their house was bombed out. In Damascus, he had worked for the United Nations as a teacher of Arabic. “We fled our homes because of our children,” Ahmar said, adding: “But we are not doing well here either.”

His family has been living in a tent in Hangar 1 for two weeks. “Together with three other families! There are 12 of us in one tent, including four children. It’s cold, we can hardly manage to wash and we can’t stomach the food,” he says.

Ahmar especially deplores the sanitary situation. The toilet containers are located outside the building. The young father points to his two-year-old son. “He’s sick and at night I often have to go out in the cold with him to the toilet container.” Often only one washing facility was available because the others were damaged and closed.

“More and more schools are being closed in Syria”

Walaa, who speaks very good English, is only 25 years old. She escaped from Syria with her 1½-year-old son, Siraj, in a small boat across the Mediterranean. Her sister had paid more than €1,000 for the crossing.

“There were 47 adults and 12 children in our 8½-metre-long boat. We were very afraid. Water was getting into the boat. The men had to constantly scoop it out from the bottom of the boat, and we had to throw everything we had overboard. I kept only a small rucksack for my child,” she said.

The boat made it to Greece, “where the people were very friendly when they met us.” The trek continued from there over the Balkan route to Slovenia and finally Germany. Walaa went on to say: “I was told that Germany is the best place. There you will get medical treatment for your child. Siraj was always sick during the journey.”

Walaa is also hoping to obtain legal aid in Germany to get a divorce from her British husband. She bitterly tells her story. “I wanted to study English. More and more schools were being closed because of the war in Syria,” she says. She married a British man who treated her brutally. He beat her and finally left her while she was visiting her sick mother in Jordan, even though she was pregnant.

In order to travel to London where her husband lives, she was granted a tourist visa for only six months. Walaa could not return to Syria. Her family’s house in Damascus was destroyed and her younger brother fled to escape conscription into the Syrian army. Only her elder brother is still living in Syria—with six children, in abject poverty and in constant fear of being killed in the war.



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