

Berlin: Hundreds demonstrate against ill treatment of refugees

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On the evening of November 29 hundreds of people demonstrated outside the Berlin refugee registration centre, the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo), to protest against the inhumane treatment of refugees. The demonstration was organized at short notice by volunteers from the group “Night before LaGeSo” via Facebook and was supported by other groups, including “Moabit Helps”.

Many of the demonstrators, who gathered despite pouring rain, brought homemade signs and banners bearing slogans such as “Refugee crisis? No, a management crisis!” “First welcome, then (allowed to) freeze” and “Stop the shameless spectacle”.

Rebecka, a student at Humboldt University who regularly helps refugees, came to the demonstration because she regards the conditions at LaGeSo as scandalous. “The behaviour of the Berlin Senate can only be described as institutional racism”, she said. “The temperature has dropped and the first fatality is only a matter of time. This can only be explained by the fact that people are to be forced to quit Berlin.”

A similar assessment was to be heard from almost everyone aware of the conditions prevailing at LaGeSo and who had decided to attend the demonstration. For months, hundreds of refugees have been forced to wait for hours at the gates of the site in all weather conditions, to sign up for an asylum procedure or receive vital provisions. Those forced to queue include many sick persons, the elderly and children.

Although the initial registration of refugees has now been outsourced, many still wait at the LaGeSo premises for transport to the new application centre in Bundesallee. Hundreds also wait day after day to obtain a guarantee of payment for accommodation in a hostel, a medical certificate or other essential social services.

LaGeSo’s Kafkaesque numbering system has

collapsed, and so it is now basically: first come, first served. This deliberately created situation means that people begin queuing in the evening and then spend the night in front of LaGeSo in the hope of securing an appointment the next day.

On the Facebook page Moabit Helps a hostel operator tells of refugees who failed to receive an appointment although they had queued overnight for an entire week. As a result the hostel received no income and the operators do not know how to continue to finance their property. When the operator sought to clarify the matter with LaGeSo she was immediately confronted with the miserable conditions prevailing at the centre: “I was approached by dozens of weeping people, pleading for help. There were men weeping, completely exhausted and desperate. They thought I worked there,” she related.

It is not uncommon for people to wait for weeks at LaGeSo to obtain an appointment. Heated tents were erected on the grounds of the building, but they can only be entered at 4 a.m., when the premises officially open. Prior to that time those waiting can only observe the empty heated tents from a place on the ground in front of the premises, squatting or sitting in rain or snow.

When the gates are finally opened a mass of desperate people then rush in. Helpers report of bone fractures and other injuries in the melee.

Employees of the attendant security firm have reacted aggressively. “One gets the impression of frightened animals being forced through a gate, with wrangling and pushing”, declared one witness on Facebook. “Some want to get to the front, there is pushing. One of the group who was not aggressive was pulled out, then he has lost his place. And he hopes that his sister, 15 meters away in the women’s queue, has a chance. For

him it's all over.”

The guards of the Gegenbauer security company have been credited with a number of violent attacks on refugees. But the company only officially withdrew its services after one German newspaper published a video from the break room at LaGeSo, which showed one company employee railing against refugees and those helping them in a fascist rant. Until a replacement company is found, refugees still confront Gegenbauer personnel.

In the video, the security employee demands that refugees “be swept out of the country”, “while their helpers and do-gooders who talk big” should be locked away in a concentration camp. “And we still have plenty of summer camps. I swear they can be used again. Over the gates, Arbeit macht frei [Work makes you free]”—the notorious slogan over the camps and gas chambers of the Nazis. The man went on to express his support for the racist Pegida movement and the far-right Alternative for Germany, AfD.

The fact that the situation at LaGeSo has not yet escalated and led to further deaths is exclusively due to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers who work day and night to mitigate the brutal policies of the Berlin Senate.

Moabit Helps supports the refugees with food, hot drinks, clothing and medical care. The smaller group “Night before LaGeSo”, which had called the demonstration, takes care of the many people who are queuing at night, providing them with warm clothes, mattresses, food, etc.

Nazila, who came to the demonstration, reported that the initiative “Night before LaGeSo” not only provided provisions but also worked to provide accommodation. The group has been able to organize two coaches where those waiting can keep warm.

The demonstration made clear the growing anger of helpers with the Berlin Senate. They sacrifice days and nights of their time to alleviate the worst hardships, but are then repeatedly sabotaged in their efforts by the Senate, which deliberately worsens the situation for the refugees.

“Politicians are doing this on purpose to discourage refugees”, said Eno, who works in an institution for young people who have fled to Germany without their parents. “They want to show that they are not welcome here. This is absolutely absurd, its sick.” He described

how victims are harassed. “There has to be the release of funds to improve the situation,” he said.

His companion Maela also assumes a conscious campaign is being waged against refugees: “Politicians are doing nothing to improve conditions in LaGeSo. The press denounces refugees, but say nothing about the conditions under which they must live.”

Both also expressed their opposition to German participation in the war against Syria, which could force even more people to flee the country. “Paris is just a pretext”, said Maela. “First of all they built up IS and now they use it as a pretext for a war. It's not about the fight against terrorism, it is about money and power. As in Iraq.”

A pensioner who came to the demonstration after he heard about the situation in LaGeSo, described the German mission against Syria as a disaster. “We have no business there”, he said.



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