

New Year's message for refugees in Berlin: It will get worse!

Verena Nees
13 January 2016

It was -7 degrees and had just begun to snow when WSWs reporters arrived on the grounds of the Lageso (State office for health and social affairs) in Berlin on the morning of January 6. We wanted to find out if the situation for refugees in Berlin had improved. "A definite no", Christiane Beckmann from the Moabit Helps initiative told us.

Without the volunteers who are working day and night, there would have been deaths long ago. The onset of winter has considerably worsened conditions for the approximately 40,000 refugees in Berlin; the first cases of frostbite have taken place since, despite the addition of two warming tents, and hundreds have to wait in line in the cold.

In front of House D, where "Moabit Helps" has a room, refugees wait for donated warm clothes from the Berlin population. Helpers distribute plastic capes to protect against the snowfall, donated from private sources.

"We are no longer helpers", explained Christiane. "We understand that we are a political force, as spokespeople for those forced to flee." Regardless of the reason why they have fled, whether from war or poverty, the speaker from Moabit Helps said, refugees have the right to be treated like human beings.

In Berlin, where the living standards of the population have been "cut to the bare minimum", the situation confronting refugees reflects general conditions for all, Christiane continued. "The refugees are like a catalytic converter, they show problems as a whole." One could no longer speak simply of "refugees", but also "non-refugees". This included the workers at Lageso, who were working "until they dropped". But they are not responsible for the conditions, the state Senate is.

A spokesperson for the Lageso press office confirmed countless hours of overtime for Lageso employees. This is connected to the cuts made to public services in Berlin. During the period of government under Mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD) and the Left Party, 500 jobs were cut from the facility. In total, since reunification, the number of public sector workers in Berlin fell from 200,000 to 108,000.

"Apartments instead of camps"

The accommodation situation is becoming increasingly critical. While solidarity among the Berlin population is unbroken, with hundreds making their private apartments available, the Senate is pursuing its own agenda. BUL, the department responsible within Lageso for managing accommodation, was placed under the control of a coordinating office of the Senate (LKF) last June, which pushed for the creation of "emergency accommodation" in sports halls, exhibition halls, and hangars at the former Tempelhof airport.

In these camps, the Senate is systematically breaching legal regulations. For the approximately 2,000 people accommodated in the hangars at Tempelhof, only 2 square metres of living space are available per person. This violates Berlin's building and apartment law and Lageso's quality standards connected with this for communal accommodation. These provide for a minimum of between 6 and 9 square metres for adults and 4 square metres for children under six. Even a prisoner must have 6 square metres of living space!

Mayor Michael Müller (SPD) is nonetheless pressing ahead with the plan to establish a camp for 15,000 refugees on the grounds of Tempelhof airport. He intends to have all seven hangars occupied, although the heating has already failed in one, the roof is leaking in another, and the sanitary and medical conditions are unbearable. In addition, air halls are to be put up on the grounds of the airport. Müller and Social Senator Mario Czaja (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) claim that with this they intend to prevent refugees from becoming homeless. This is the official version given by Lageso spokeswoman Sylvia Kostner to WSWs reporters.

However, the so-called emergency accommodation, in which people are allegedly to be housed for a short time, is being increasingly exposed as permanent camps.

Yilma, a 33-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, whom

WSWS reporters met in a Vivantes medical tent, has a story to tell about this. He came to Berlin on November 10 with his wife and three children after a journey of 26 days from Kabul, where Yilma had a small business. “Since then, we live in a sports hall on Wrangel Street”, he said, “together with more than 200 people.”

Today, with the help of a German friend, he has come to Lageso for an appointment to receive pocket money. But he failed to get a meeting! “They gave me a new appointment January 25. I don’t know how my family is supposed to survive over the coming 19 days.” Conditions in the sports hall are becoming increasingly unbearable. “The showers don’t work, there is not enough food. It’s not easy to live together with 200 people. There is no private sphere.”

A line is forming behind the tent for the distribution of food. At that moment, security personnel from the Gegenbauer firm, in which Czaja was once a manager, are dealing harshly with an alleged North African refugee at the tent entrance. They shove him across the square where he is desperately sitting on the ice-cold ground. “This happens all the time here”, Yilma said.

Twenty-four-year-old Mariyam from Damascus, who arrived a few days ago, is being housed in a sports hall on Schönhauser Allee. “I can’t live there”, she said and pointed to her two-year-old child. “At most, there is one toilet that works for a hundred people.”

Such conditions are acknowledged by the Senate. In the words of the mayor, who gave an interview to *Die Welt* on December 20, “If we reduce demand by focusing on large mass accommodation rather than the small and decentralised accommodation which is actually desired, we can still accommodate many refugees.” On January 6, the Senate tabled a draft law that will overturn the ban on building on the grounds of Tempelhof airport, a ban based on a referendum held in 2014.

Refugee organisations like Moabit Helps strongly protested at the beginning of January against this plan. “Instead of ghettoising refugees in mass camps”, the Senate should adopt measures so that refugees can move into enclosed housing units in communal housing and move into normal rented accommodation as soon as possible, they said. They demanded the closure of the Tempelhof mass camp. Previously, the Berlin refugee council i.V. called for the confiscation of empty buildings and holiday homes.

This could not be done, according to press spokeswoman Kostner. “The buildings and apartments are in private hands, we cannot confiscate them.” Disappointedly, she added, “How easy it was immediately after reunification to house refugees, for example from Yugoslavia. At the time we still had empty homes for the elderly and clinics which were in good condition.” But later, the Senate had privatised them

and sold them to investors. It should be added that this was also the fate of tens of thousands of social housing units, sold off to property speculators.

Violence in the hangars at Tempelhof

On November 29, the desperation of the refugees in the Tempelhof camp flared up. Clashes broke out in the line waiting for food, and arguments erupted. The manager of the private food company Tamaja GmbH., Michael Elias, halted the distribution of food for half an hour. This resulted in the situation escalating into violence. The private company called the police, who arrived in civil war style with over a hundred armed and helmeted officers—media reports spoke of more than 300—and detained several refugees as if they were the worst criminals.

An eyewitness among those who were detained told the *B.Z.* newspaper that the manager had insulted the refugees in Arabic with obscene expressions. There were also attacks from security personnel. After being released by the police, they did not allow him back into the hangars. He was not even permitted to retrieve his personal belongings and was forced to spend the night in an underground subway station.

The incident reveals the future confronting refugees in the mass camps as soon as the deportations of those “without a perspective of staying” called for by the political establishment are implemented.

After the outburst of violence in Tempelhof, Berlin’s interior senator Frank Henkel (CDU) issued a tirade against refugees. According to the *Tagespiegel* of November 30, he threatened that “These violations of the law are unacceptable and intolerable. There are laws in our country. Those who do not respect them, we have alternative accommodation. With barred doors and windows.”

An image of the SS concentration camp Columbiahaus involuntarily comes to mind—the camp that stood on the grounds of Tempelhof airport until 1938.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact