

Berlin town hall meeting protests discrimination against refugees

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On Thursday evening, about 1,400 people flocked to the old terminal building of the former Tempelhof Airport in Berlin. It was one of the biggest ever town hall meetings in the German capital.

The event was hosted by Berlin's Senate (city government) and the Tempelhof-Schöneberg district authority. They wanted to showcase the plans of Mayor Michael Müller (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who wants to build a mass accommodation facility for 7,000 refugees in the airport hangars and on the airport forecourt, and win support for this proposal.

However, the plan did not succeed. Angry and upset, many participants expressed their anger and made clear that they strongly opposed the Senate plans.

The atmosphere in the hall stood in stark contrast to media reports since the New Year incidents in Cologne, which have sought to suggest that a fundamental change of mood has taken place in the population and that there is now widespread opposition to refugees. Placards visible at the meeting bore slogans such as "Integration instead of ghetto", "Müller makes refugees into second-class citizens". The placards expressed solidarity with refugees and opposed the creation of a ghetto at Tempelhof Airport.

Not a single speaker from the floor supported the Senate. Instead, many were appalled at the treatment of displaced people in the airport hangars and other mass accommodation. Some 2,500 people have already been living in four hangars under inhumane conditions since last October—with no showers, no laundry facilities, with external portable toilets, under conditions of loud noise and unbearable crowding. Twelve people are housed in one tent, 10 people crammed into an open-topped trade fair booth. For each person there are only two square meters of living space.

The Senate now wants to occupy three more hangars, in addition to forecourt halls and modular accommodation, as well as "integration facilities" like kindergartens, canteen kitchens and sporting grounds. To this end, the "Tempelhof law" would be changed—allegedly "temporarily" until the end of 2019. This law was enacted in 2014 following a referendum. It imposes a building prohibition on Tempelhof Airport, to preserve it as a recreation area for the population and prevent the construction

of luxury apartments that would drive up rents even more in the adjacent, poorer neighbourhoods.

The Senate had dispatched an entire squad of state secretaries to the town hall meeting—in addition to the secretary for transport and environment, Christian Gaebler (SPD), Education Secretary Mark Rackles (SPD), State Secretary for Social Affairs Dirk Gerstle (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), and the head of the newly created "coordination staff for refugee management", Secretary of State Dieter Glietsch (SPD), who was until 2011 Berlin chief of police. The district mayor of Tempelhof-Schöneberg, Monika Schöttler (SPD), also sat on the podium. Present in the audience were mayors of adjacent districts and Michael Elias, head of the private operating company Tamaja GmbH.

Social Senator (state minister) Mario Czaja (CDU), who is under pressure because of the catastrophic conditions at the infamous LAGeSo (State Office for Health and Social Affairs) in Berlin, had cancelled his announced participation. There were fears in the Senate Chancellery that there could be commotion at the meeting. Security checks were carried out at the entrances and water bottles taken away.

"Large Arrival Centres"

The introductory remarks from the podium, claiming that due to the many refugees coming to Berlin the Senate had no choice but to transform Tempelhof airport into a mass accommodation facility, were met with boos and numerous interjections of "liar!", "stop!" and "get to the point!"

When State Secretary Glietsch declared that "admittedly" one must "push" one's own minimum standards downward, loud jeers broke out. Glietsch tried to appease the audience; nobody wanted people to be accommodated there for an extended period, he said. In the end, he even claimed that the standards were not so bad and they could not be described as "inhumane". This resulted in an uproar throughout the hall.

State Secretary Gerstle used jargon such as "Large Arrival Centres" to describe the plans for refugees. In this way, he

sought to cloak the ghetto-like character of the planned mass camp—that is a “separate neighbourhood” for refugees, “separated from the rest of the population”—in terms reminiscent of the fate of the Jewish population in past centuries.

Like the arguments used in the past by various mayors, Gaebler asserted that the Senate only wanted to aid “people who were fleeing”, to avoid homelessness. His claims to “respect the referendum”—and that he would therefore establish modular buildings “only in the short term”—were met with jeers. The building ban was thus not being suspended, he asserted. The aim was to realize “concepts for integration and welcome”.

When Gaebler said, to this end, the Senate also had the right to amend laws, there were loud protests and whistles and some held up a sign reading “Democracy instead of Dictatorship”.

Especially loud jeers erupted when Secretary Rackles began his contribution with the claim that the meeting was “living democracy”. He also used verbal tricks to paint the politics of the Senate in a rosy light. The Senate did not want to build a refugee school on the premises, as reported, but a facility called “fit for school”. Here, up to 300 children would learn their first language skills. Then they should be incorporated into neighbouring schools. The Senate was against a large concentration of refugee children. The “core objective”, according to Rackle, was literally, “to make the large crowd manageable”.

In the debate, many residents, volunteer refugee helpers and supporters of the referendum came forward to speak. “Tempelhof is the largest, the worst and probably most expensive refugee camp in Berlin”, said George Classen from the Refugee Council to great support, and for this reason he urged its closure. He described the inhumane situation in the airport hangars, where people have had to live for months. “Two square meters per person, no privacy, without any perspective”, he said. “People cannot sleep at night, they get sick. ... You cannot treat people like this”.

A young Lebanese man, who has lived in Berlin for some time, joined in the discussion: “My parents fled from Lebanon to Germany. We were very lucky that there were no camps then”, he said. “When we arrived in a refugee home, we were several families and had contact with Germans. I played with German children. How is this possible in the accommodation at Tempelhof? How are children here to speak German if there are no Germans around them? They will not even get out of this airport!”

A volunteer who teaches German courses in the hangars, in emotional remarks directed at the podium, said: “You have thanked the volunteers here. I must say, I do not need your thanks! Do you know what it’s like in the hangar, in this level of noise? I am totally exhausted every time after 90 minutes teaching German. What should the refugees say who have to live here 24 hours a day, who have no showers, no possibility

to prepare food, no possibility for quiet, and no way to come into contact with those who have already lived here longer”.

Other speakers pointed to the many empty properties in Berlin, to buildings and houses that could provide better accommodation for people, but were kept empty by investors and real estate companies.

An elderly man reported the impending demolition of houses in his neighbourhood belonging to the housing cooperative WBV Neukölln. “Today, these apartments cost 4.23 euros per square metre”, he said. “After demolition and rebuilding they will cost 8.50 euros per square metre. Consider this: 8,000 refugees are supposed to live in these halls! But the housing association wants to tear down homes that are habitable. They have electricity, they have hot water, they have heating. These are suitable apartments for families with young children. We have been calling for months that these apartments be occupied by refugees”.

He added that the authorities had refused to negotiate with the housing association regarding such occupancy. “No access opportunities”, the Neukölln authorities claimed. Later, the district mayor, Dr. Franziska Giffey (SPD), responded to this contribution with the revealing statement: “Only if the owners allow can we negotiate with them about it. Property is protected in Germany. This is private property”. Only in the front rows, which were reserved for highly paid members of the Senate Chancellery and the various municipal district offices, was there some applause.

Emotions in the hall spilled over following comments by an elderly local resident from Tempelhof. After she expressed her displeasure with the Senate policy, she cried out: “I think politics now just sucks”.

Finally, another resident of the Tempelhof area remarked determinedly: “I am not afraid of 7,000 or even 10,000 refugees. But I do fear this Senate, which within one legislative period has passed a law resulting from a referendum and then taken this away again, thus violating the constitution. ... I note that the Federal Republic of Germany is once again conducting war, and that we have now, as you say, an agglomeration of people here. Yes, then say what you really mean ... we will build concentration camps again!”



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