

Berlin college rector protests police intervention

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The rector of the Alice-Salomon College in Berlin has protested in an April 7 open letter to Berlin's mayor Michael Müller (Social Democrats, SPD) against a recent police intervention during a march by right-wing extremists. It was "an unprecedented incident that, for us, is not acceptable," the letter says.

What took place? On April 2, around 30 police stormed into Alice-Salomon College (ASH) in the district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, forced all students and tutors present into the main auditorium, blocked all exits and collected personal information.

The operational command justified the attack on the internationally renowned college for social work by referring to a placard hanging outside the building which called for "racists and Nazis" to be blocked. Groups of known right-wing extremists gathered in front of the college, before subsequently marching through the local area under the slogan "Security instead of Fear." Many college students took part in the counterdemonstration.

But instead of taking action against the approximately 300 aggressive right-wingers, who repeatedly gave the Hitler salute, filmed the college and its students with cameras and called for attacks on left-wing opponents on a banner ("Leftist fascists have names and addresses"), the police tore down the college's placard and claimed the slogan was a call to commit "criminal acts," specifically "blocking a demonstration protected by the right to assemble."

Two students were arrested and carried out of the building. One was accused, according to *Tagesspiegel*, of participating in the "crime," while the other was accused of "insulting" police officers.

Professor Dr. Uwe Bettig, ASH rector, expressed his disgust and sharply criticised the police intervention. "A state college as an academic and protected space

cannot be dealt with by the police in such a manner," he wrote in his letter to the Berlin Senate.

There was no acute danger resulting from the placard, he argued. He had been at the location himself on the day and gave his telephone number to the police operational commander prior to the demonstration so he could intervene to negotiate in the event of conflict. But he was not, as had been previously agreed, informed before action was taken.

Police spokesman Stefan Redlich responded to a question on this from *Tagesspiegel*, "An obligation to inform does not exist."

Rector Bettig, who has led ASH since 2014, told the WSWs that the actions of the police were "horrificing." The placard concerned had been hanging on the building alongside other placards opposing racism for some time. In his opinion it was therefore inexplicable why the police stormed into the college without warning and tore down the banner precisely at the beginning of the right-wing protest. The college management intended to bring the case to court, Bettig said. "Ultimately, we have the rights to our house," he said.

ASH, which moved in 1998 from the Berlin-Schöneberg district to Hellersdorf, has long been the focus of right-wing groups. It is well known for its strong engagement against xenophobia and readiness to help refugees. Many students and tutors look after refugees in the nearby accommodation centres and organise free seminars and consultations for them.

In the summer semester, a lecture series on racism is to take place, and teaching seminars are planned in the refugee accommodation centres. The college's library and canteen are open to refugees. An "anti-racist registration point" established at ASH in 2013 carefully documents incidents of right-wing violence.

This practice, Bettig told the WSW, corresponds to the college's general principles and history. It was founded as a "social women's school" in 1908 by Alice Salomon and obtained college status in 1932. In 1933, it was renamed "School for people's care" by the Nazis, and its Jewish and Social Democratic tutors were removed. Today, under the school's original name, students are trained in social work, health care and education, and the college has many international contacts.

"Scholarship involves international and social exchange," Bettig said. "What is happening here is damaging to the school's good reputation." The latest developments in Marzahn-Hellersdorf are therefore very disturbing to him.

Right-wing parties and groups are increasingly on the offensive. Every Monday, neo-Nazis and hooligans march through the streets and repeatedly threaten refugees, foreign students and anyone from the college who is involved in anti-racist actions.

"The police do not protect left-wing counterdemonstrators to a sufficient degree," Bettig said. "The harshness of the police towards our students fills me with great concern."

Already in December 2014, Bettig wrote to Frank Henkel, senator for the interior, demanding more protection for those intervening on behalf of asylum seekers and their protection from right-wing agitators. He referred to an incident when the police allegedly intervened against counterdemonstrators when they were leaving the venue on the tram. The police also intentionally directed the march route of a right-wing demonstration to a refugee accommodation centre to evade a blockade by students and youth.

Henkel did not respond to the letter. Instead, the rector received "quite an angry letter" from his state secretary, Bernd Krömer, which rejected criticism of the police and accused the college head of not having checked his information, "the veracity of which is at least dubious."

Henkel has now provided his answer: in the State Senate last Thursday he justified the massive police intervention against the college as a "constitutional action." In response to questions from Left Party and Green deputies, he said that "everything went according to plan" in the operation. The police had to intervene in line with the "legality principle," because

the text on the banner was a "prosecutable offence."

Henkel said nothing about the Hitler salutes from the ranks of the fascist mob.

With regard to the neo-Nazis' banner that read: "Leftist fascists have names and addresses," he explained that the police's legal adviser had reviewed the banners of both sides. "The banner of the right-wing with similar lettering was deemed not to fulfil the requirements for a criminal offence."

This is an astonishing statement from the overseer of the Berlin police and also its legal adviser when one considers that the demand to gather the names and addresses of "leftist fascists" is no mere threat. The small right-wing party The III. Weg (III Way) recently sent postcards to an association for refugees and some politicians with the slogan, "Whoever does not love Germany should leave," including the SPD local mayor in Marzahn-Hellersdorf, Stefan Komoß.

Last year, noisy neo-Nazis marched in front of the house of Left Party politician Petra Pau in the same district. The fact that Henkel based himself on the opinion of the legal adviser raises the question of whether he gave the go-ahead for the police intervention at Alice-Salomon College.

The incident is a warning. For months, the Berlin State Senate has victimised refugees at the now notorious state office for health and social affairs (Lageso), and confined them to inhumane conditions in sports halls and airport hangars. Now it is trying to intimidate the numerous volunteers and supporters among the Berlin population with police violence. Henkel has proposed the election slogan of "Strong Berlin" for the upcoming State Senate elections.

The targeting of a college by police because it is taking action against xenophobia is an alarming attack on democratic rights and prepares the way for right-wing forces.



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