

A year in the plight of Berlin's refugees

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Last summer, the department responsible for dealing with the influx of refugees became a symbol of the inhuman asylum policy of the Berlin state administration. Images of the queues of exhausted and desperate people, including the sick, pregnant women and small children, were seen around the world and unleashed indignation everywhere.

Today, in the lead-up to the Berlin state election, the Senate (state executive) wants the distressing images to be forgotten. Refugee numbers have fallen since the EU and the German government supported the closure of the Balkan route and the sealing off of the EU's external borders, bringing a rising death toll in the Mediterranean.

But for those waiting in line at the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo), nothing has changed as far as the inhumane conditions confronting refugees in Berlin, apart from the fact they are now to be banished from the public gaze.

This is why the department providing services to refugees has been moved to the International Congress Centre (ICC) and the entire LaGeSo bureaucracy is moving to the building of the former Landesbank in the suburb of Wilmersdorf. Sports halls and hostels in Berlin city centre are being cleared of refugees. In future, tourists and the well-heeled residents of Berlin's luxury boulevards and trendy districts are to be spared the sight of worn down, miserable and desperate people.

Most of those who have managed to escape to Berlin are stuck in a trap, however. Their hopes for a new life have mostly been destroyed. Only a few can expect to be granted permanent asylum, mostly highly trained professionals and academics whom politicians deem worthy. On the other hand, thousands are languishing in mass accommodation, without hope of finding work or training, increasingly at risk of deportation.

For the people of Berlin, the last year has also

represented a bitter experience: Their enormous willingness to help and their compassion for the refugees has confronted the hostility and bureaucratic arrogance of those running LaGeSo and the Senate administration.

To recap: When the war in Syria last year drove millions of people into flight, and thousands arrived every day in Berlin, LaGeSo let them endure days and nights in the open air, in sweltering summer heat and in the bitter cold of winter.

They confronted harassment and attacks by security guards and only withstood this humiliating and inhumane treatment due to the large number of volunteers from among the population of Berlin, who provided food and drink for them, often taking refugees into their own homes. Without such humanity from ordinary Berliners, there would have been more deaths than the little boy Mohamed, who was kidnapped and murdered when his mother waited in line with her children at night.

Despite repeated protests, the LaGeSo bureaucrats refused to house refugees in decent accommodation. They have had to stay in overcrowded hostel rooms, whose operators earned a fortune, in gymnasiums and other mass accommodation without any privacy. To date, well over a thousand people have still been living for months in the hangars of the former Tempelhof airport, once the scene of brutal exploitation and forced labour under the Nazis.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) state Interior Minister Frank Henkel is now systematically preparing to drive a large part of the refugees out of Berlin. He is aggressively implementing the asylum law, which has been systematically tightened up by the federal government. Only recently, Henkel boasted that Berlin had increased the number of deportations from Berlin threefold compared with 2015.

At the same time, the Senate is using the refugee

crisis in order to increase the powers of the state, bolster an atmosphere of law-and-order and establish authoritarian structures, of which far-right forces such as a state attorney belonging to the Alternative for Germany are part. In Marzahn-Hellersdorf, a former candidate of the neo-Nazi German People's Union manages a hostel for asylum seekers.

The Senate is seeking to intimidate the vast number of Berliners who have shown solidarity with the refugees—through smear campaigns against initiatives like Moabit helps and massive police operations, as at the Alice Salomon University.

Earlier this year, all the parties in the state legislature agreed on the “Master Plan for Integration,” which, contrary to its specious name, divides refugees into “good” and “bad,” those who may be permitted to remain and the vast majority who are destined to be deported. In the same breath, it advocates increasing police powers.

After a year of LaGeSo, one thing has become particularly clear: The Berlin Senate has used the refugee crisis to establish authoritarian structures that are increasingly directed against the vast majority of the people of Berlin and their social resistance. This was shown by the massive police action against the protest demonstration in Berlin-Friedrichshain a few weeks ago, provoked by an unlawful eviction ordered by state Interior Minister Henkel.

The situation in Berlin is part of the aggressive foreign policy to which Germany's ruling elite has returned. Berlin is once again to become the capital of militarism. For the ruling class it is clear that it is precisely here in Berlin, where one can see evidence of their past crimes in the bullet and shrapnel holes on many buildings, that this requires a dictatorial regime.

All the mainstream parties, even those like the Left Party, who are hypocritically exploiting the refugee situation in their election campaign, support this course of action. Especially since the events of Munich, Würzburg and Ansbach, all the establishment parties are calling for more police and a stronger state.

Workers must combine their solidarity for the refugees with a common struggle against war and dictatorship, building on their own socialist traditions. This is at the centre of the election campaign of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) for the Berlin Senate.



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