Demonstrators in Cologne support IYSSE fight for freedom of expression at Humboldt University

Our reporters
26 April 2017

The IYSSE and the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) distributed thousands of copies of the leaflet "The Defence of Historical Truth and the Fight against the Alternative for Germany (AfD)" on Saturday in Cologne during demonstrations against the far-right AfD's party conference. Almost half the slightly more than 10,000 protest participants took a copy, with many reading it immediately and discussing with IYSSE and SGP members.

The leaflet reports the events at Berlin's Humboldt University, where the university administration is trying to suppress criticism of right-wing professors. The Humboldt University Presidium has declared criticism of Eastern Europe historian Jörg Baberowski to be "unacceptable" and threatened critics with criminal action after a Cologne court ruled that Baberowski may be described as a right-wing radical.

The protests against the AfD, which moved even further to the right at its party congress, were accompanied by a massive police mobilisation. Four thousand police officers in combat fatigues were deployed to protect the party congress and to intimidate the demonstrators. The police imposed an overflight ban. In addition to special task forces and water cannon, detention centres for "troublemakers" were established in the neighbouring cities of Brühl and Bonn, in case the jail cells in Cologne proved insufficient.

Supported by police forces from all over North Rhine Westphalia and nationwide, this was the largest operation in the history of the Cologne police. Before the demonstration, Cologne police president Jürgen Mathies had warned against riots and declared, "We are very worried." The protests, however, were all peaceful.

The SGP/IYSSE leaflet drew a direct link between the growth of the AfD and "the increase in militarism, the beefing up of police weaponry and the surveillance apparatus and the inhuman refugee policy of the European Union." "The ruling class is aware that the return to militarism and great power politics faces overwhelming opposition in face of the experience of two world wars. That is why they have to rewrite history and whitewash the crimes of German imperialism," it reads.

It is this context that the leaflet presented the events at Humboldt University. It cited numerous statements by Baberowski, who trivialises National Socialism (Nazism) and the war of extermination in the East. For example, in February 2014, he had told leading news weekly *Der Spiegel* that "Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn't vicious," and defended the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte. This relativization of the crimes of Nazism goes hand in hand with statements against refugees and the support for war and violence.

Criticism of such positions, which are no different than those of the AfD, is now to be banned according to the decree of Humboldt University President Sabine Kunst. Kunst is a Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician, like North-Rhine Westphalia's state premier Hannelore Kraft, who appeared in Cologne as a speaker against the AfD. This only underscores the fact that the SPD, which has adopted large parts of the anti-immigrant and law-and-order programme of the AfD, is not seriously opposed to this far-right party. Kraft was simply concerned with winning votes for the state elections on May 14th.

The mostly young demonstrators expressed their

© World Socialist Web Site

disgust with the politics of the AfD. Many carried homemade banners and posters that advocated tolerance, equality, human dignity and solidarity, and against racism, xenophobia, and anti-refugee sentiments.

Most were horrified when they read what Baberowski had said and wrote, and outraged that criticism of these views was considered "unacceptable." "Crass," "That shouldn't happen," "unbelievable" were some of the first reactions. Some asked, "You are speaking about a university here in Germany, in Berlin?" Above all, Baberowski's statement that Hitler was not vicious appalled many people. They regarded it as a scandal that criticism of this should be suppressed.

A young man from Yugoslavia who had come mainly to protect his younger sister said: "She was recently surrounded after a demonstration against the Nazis, and I will take care of her." He also wanted to protest against the machinations of the big banks, he said. "When you look at them, you get an impression of who is responsible for poverty and injustice." He said they were also responsible for the rise of right-wing parties.

After reading the leaflet, he said that he had not heard about what was happening at Humboldt University before. "It is unbelievable that someone can say something like this and he is defended for it."

Yannik, a 21-year-old student from Bremen, knew of Baberowski: "I followed the discussion with Bremen University AStA (Student Union)." The professor was trying to prevent criticism by the AStA, he said. "We don't need to talk for long about Baberowski. It's clear he is a right-winger."

When he was told that IYSSE members were being prevented from distributing leaflets at the HU, he said, "Banning flyers but at the same time calling for a debate [as Kunst does] does not work at all."

Merlin read the SGP / IYSSE leaflet through and said, "It's really bad that criticism of Baberowski is being suppressed." He was very concerned about these developments, "The movement against such points of view must grow faster than the development of the right wing."

An elderly couple remembered their own youth: "In the 1980s, it would not have been possible to defend someone who relativises the Holocaust. But to use the freedom of knowledge as an argument, we know about it. This was the way the historical crimes of the Nazis were defended in the Historikerstreit [“historians dispute” between Nolte and other historians in the mid-1980s] by the falsifiers of these crimes."

Maximiliane is just finishing her high school and is looking for a place at university. She said, "It's nonsense that such a person is allowed to teach." In order to find out more about the issues involved, she bought the book "Scholarship or War Propaganda?", which deals with the positions of Baberowski and other professors and the background of the conflict at Humboldt University.

Many demonstrators expressed their support for the work of the SGP and the IYSSE and wished it continued success.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site