

Demonstration against rent increases in Berlin draws 25,000

Our reporters
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According to organizers, 25,000 people demonstrated in the German capital Berlin on Saturday against rising rent prices and the lack of housing. Like other cities across Germany, apartments in Berlin are unaffordable for growing numbers of people due to investors' insatiable profit demands.

A broad alliance of 200 organizations called the demonstration. Over recent days, various actions took place daily under the slogan "Coming Together." These included public debates, the symbolic blocking of streets, and film screenings.

The large numbers participating in the demonstration, which was originally only expected to attract 4,000, illustrates the depth of the anger over expensive rents among students, workers, low-paid self-employed professionals and pensioners. The official parties and trade unions were hardly anywhere to be seen, while homemade signs and banners predominated.

Many participants linked the issue of rent with criticism of capitalism. "Housing is not a commodity," "No profit from our rent," and "Push back capitalism" were some of the banners. One participant focused on the major programme of rearmament agreed upon by the new grand coalition government, demanding, "Apartments instead of weapons."

Many of the demonstrators have first-hand experience of the impact of rent increases. Nadja, who came to the protest with her sister Katja, fears that she will no longer be able to keep living in her district of Prenzlauer Berg with her partner and two children. Like many other renters, she has an old contract. "If renovations take place, that would be a total disaster." She spoke about an 80-year-old neighbour who lost her apartment because she was unable to pay the rent.

"Housing is a basic right," interjected Katja, who lives in Berlin Mitte. She said hyper capitalism was

responsible for rent increases and growing social polarisation. She gave expression to what many demonstrators were thinking.

Christine also has first-hand experience of the situation. Her rent was recently increased by 10 percent. She is in her mid-20s, works as a social worker, and has to spend around 50 percent of her wages on rent. "I have virtually nothing for cultural activities, because electricity, groceries, transport costs, etc. eat up almost all the rest."

A group of students and apprentices has made the same experience. They are directly impacted by rent increases. Some of them are already spending 40 percent of their low incomes on rent. Niko is looking for an apartment. But as an apprentice it is difficult, because landlords prefer people with a secure income. Jens, a doctoral medical student, confirmed this. During his search for an apartment, he has received offers of apartments with rents between €12 and €17 per square meter, which is unaffordable for him.

Another demonstrator explained that her 21-year-old son still stays with her because he cannot afford his own apartment due to the rapidly increasing rents. She also fears not being able to afford her apartment when she retires soon. "Then I would have to move away from Berlin," she said.

Angela, a 44-year-old saleswoman who came alone to the demonstration, explained that rent is not the only problem. "My wages haven't increased in years. If my job paid well, it wouldn't be so bad." Asked if she thought the rent issue was part of precarious social conditions, Angela answered, "Yes, rents and wages are political problems, but none of the governing politicians are interested in them."

This view was widespread at the demonstration. Christine, the social worker, felt that "the politicians

who allowed this misery in the housing market” are “deaf” to the needs of the population.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) distributed a statement which declared that “exploding rent costs” are “a product of a deliberate policy of redistributing wealth from the bottom to the top. All parliamentary parties are involved in this.”

As an SGP member discussed this with Katja and Nadja, they responded thoughtfully. Nadja said that in the face of the constantly deteriorating social situation, she often feels helpless. Katja recalled that she experienced the reunification of Germany. “Maybe we need to step up the pressure. We certainly need to come together,” she said. “The problems are the same around the world,” her sister added.

The connection between the social crisis and the drive to war was repeatedly discussed. Nadja and Katja were very concerned about this. “I’m not actually very political, but it is becoming increasingly scary,” said Nadja. A very one-sided picture is being presented in the media, as if Russia is responsible for everything, she added.

“I have friends in Russia,” reported Katja. “Of course there are dictatorial tendencies in the country. But you get a very NATO-conformist picture from Berlin.” Nadja also referred to the alleged attack on the former double agent Sergei Skripal. “Moscow was accused straight away. The waves started, as if they agreed on it beforehand.”

Stefanie and Sabine were also not only protesting over rent increases. “The whole system needs to be condemned,” they said. “I always wonder when this began, that the rich own so much and the vast majority have nothing.”

“All of this concerns me, especially the war policy,” said Sabine, a social worker. With regard to Syria and Russia, she did not feel she is being neutrally informed. “I don’t understand what’s going on in their heads. And when they want to let refugees die at the border or treat them so badly here.”

The SGP leaflet distributed in large numbers at the demonstration was met with great interest. In contrast to the organisers and the political organisations at the demonstration, the SGP linked the question of rent to the social crisis and drive to war.

The statement declared, “Today’s protest over rent is

part of a growing struggle against social inequality, work speed-up and the militarisation of the state. In France, students are protesting and railway workers are on strike, large numbers of teachers are walking off the job in the United States, and here in Germany sections of the public sector have been on strike.”

The SGP leaflet advanced the following perspective for the struggle, “When workers defend their social rights and fight for affordable rent, they inevitably come into conflict with the government and all parties in parliament. Winning this struggle requires the adoption of a socialist programme that places the needs of the population ahead of profit and a revolutionary party to unite workers around the world in the fight against social inequality and war. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) fights for this perspective.”



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