

In Germany's Hambacher Forest: The state shows its ugly face

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In Hambacher Forest near Cologne, occupied by protesters seeking to prevent the forest being razed to the ground, a journalist was killed this week when a suspension bridge between two tree houses broke and he fell 15 metres to his death. The 33-year-old blogger died at the scene of the accident, although rescue workers had tried in vain to resuscitate him.

The action alliance “Hambi remains,” which is coordinating the occupation of the forest, called for an immediate end to the police evictions. “We urge the police and [energy conglomerate] RWE to leave the forest immediately and stop this dangerous operation. No other lives should be endangered,” it said in an initial statement.

The brutal actions of the police are indeed life-threatening. Since September 6, police have been removing protesters from what is left of the 12,000-year-old forest, where some dozen activists are trying to prevent the forest clearance. On Sunday, about 8,000 people gathered there for a “forest walk” to demonstrate against the clearance and the reckless police operation.

About 3,000 police officers have been present for a week, to deal with the minimal number of those seeking to protect the forest. Entire police units march into the forest, cutting down clearings among the trees, some of them over 300 years old, and advancing with water cannons, lifting platforms and other heavy equipment. Bit by bit, they are destroying the more than 50 tree houses and huts that the forest protesters have built over about six years. The RWE energy company will commence wide-scale forest clearance on October 14 to amalgamate the area with its lignite (brown coal) mine Garzweiler II.

In the meantime, several dozen people have been arrested since the weekend alone in operations using

pepper spray and truncheons. Four people, two women and two men, are still in custody in Aachen. They are mainly accused of “resisting law enforcement officials.”

RWE claims that clearing the forest is necessary to secure the production of electricity. Even a short-term suspension would call into question the work on the open mine and production at two power plants, said RWE CEO Rolf Martin Schmitz. This is a lie, as a report by broadcaster Deutsche Welle shows, based on documents from the BUND environmental association and RWE maps. Even without the forest clearance, existing supplies to RWE power plants would be enough for more than three years.

The company is above all trying to create a *fait accompli* before the federal government’s “coal commission” decides on the future of lignite mining later this year. The German government is under pressure, as it lags far behind official global warming targets, while climate change due to drought, forest fires and devastating tropical storms has since become obvious to everyone. RWE also wants to forestall a court ruling. A renewed court case by BUND could lead to a ruling that the Hambacher forest is worth protecting under EU directives.

The North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) state government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) has clearly aligned itself with RWE. However, it is not just about enforcing the profit interests of the energy giant. Above all, the CDU-FDP regime wants to set an example against any form of left-wing and anti-capitalist protest. While in Chemnitz, Köthen and other cities, neo-Nazis are hunting down and terrorising immigrants unhindered by the police, the Düsseldorf state government is mobilising thousands of police against the peaceful

forest protesters.

“They don’t want to save trees, but abolish our state,” blustered state Interior Minister Herbert Reul (CDU) against the activists. Therefore, it was important to enforce “our zero-tolerance line.” Similarly, Paul Kemen, spokesman for the Aachen police headquarters, told broadcaster ARD on Monday, “These people obstruct the monopoly on the use of force,” adding, “We are allowed to use physical violence. Also means such as batons and pepper spray. That is expressly granted to us.”

At the end of August, state Premier Armin Laschet (CDU) claimed his government would not intervene in the dispute over the Hambach Forest. Shortly thereafter, NRW Minister for Construction Ina Scharrenbach (CDU) said that the huts and tree houses in the Hambach Forest had to be cleared immediately due to “lack of fire protection.” Thereupon the police operation began, which was also supported by the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The actions of the police in the Hambach Forest are a direct part of constructing a police state. Like the state governments in many other regions, the NRW executive also presented a new state police law in July. It removes the right to freedom of movement and establishment, the right to self-determination over one’s own data and the right to strike and assembly, and opens the door to arbitrary police action.

In Baden-Württemberg, the state government led by the Greens also tightened up its police law in November 2017, and a stricter police law is planned in Brandenburg, where the SPD and the Left Party form the executive. In Hesse, where the Greens govern as junior partners with the CDU, the state is also massively increasing its powers: In future, police officers will be able to patrol with military weapons such as assault rifles.

More than 20,000 people demonstrated in Düsseldorf in July against the NRW police bill, and the protests have not stopped. In Munich, 40,000 demonstrated against the new Bavarian police law, while in Hanover there was another demonstration of about 10,000 people.

However, the NRW state government wants to pass its police law this autumn; and the SPD opposition in the state parliament has expressly offered its cooperation.



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