

A quarter-million protest in Berlin against the grand coalition and the return of fascism

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Nearly 250,000 people demonstrated Saturday in Berlin against racism, the far-right Alternative for Germany's witch-hunting of immigrants, and the reactionary policies of the grand coalition government.

Organized around the central slogan “#indivisible—solidarity instead of exclusion,” the protest was one of the largest in recent German history.

The organizers had expected 40,000 participants and were stunned when more than six times that number showed up to demonstrate. The opening rally at Berlin's Alexanderplatz was jam packed, and when the front of the demonstration arrived at the Victory Column, just under three kilometres away, many still had not set off from the starting point.

The protest was the culmination of a growing mobilization against the grand coalition government of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, which is implementing the xenophobic and right-wing extremist positions of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in all major policy areas.

In recent weeks, demonstrations against the AfD and the right-wing policies of the grand coalition have taken place in a number of cities. They have for the most part been given little coverage by the media. Most recently more than 40,000 people demonstrated in Munich and Hamburg against racism and a new, right-wing police law.

Especially since the events in Chemnitz and Dortmund, where far-right thugs and neo-fascists chased down foreigners, evoking sympathetic and supportive comments from the police, the secret service and the federal interior minister, resistance to the government has been increasing. On Saturday, protesters carried banners and posters saying, “No to Hate Against Muslims,” “No Place for Nazis” and “Racism is Not an Alternative.”

One banner read, “Solidarity with the Victims of Right-Wing, Racist and Anti-Semitic Violence.”

In addition to the fight against racism and xenophobia, demonstrators opposed the government's anti-social policies and the growth of economic inequality. Ulrich Schneider, chief executive of the Joint Welfare Association, warned of the effects of rising poverty in Germany and called for urgent action by the government against uncontrolled increases in rents in many cities. He also denounced the efforts to pit the growing ranks of the poor and needy against immigrants and asylum seekers.

An employee of the low-wage airline Ryanair spoke about the brutal conditions confronting the workers and the strikes by Ryanair pilots and flight attendants in recent months.

The demonstration was called by the “Indivisible” alliance, a coalition of some 4,500 associations, organizations and individuals.

The alliance was joined by church organizations, charities and trade unions. Many celebrities, including the well known actor Benno Fürmann, the television presenter Jan Böhmermann and the band Die Ärzte, supported the protest. In the evening, a performance was given by songwriters Konstantin Wecker and Herbert Grönemeyer.

When it became clear in the run-up to the demonstration that the turnout could be bigger than originally anticipated, a number of political parties attempted to become involved. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) spoke of a great “affirmation of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.” Instead of sealing off [borders] and promoting nationalism, he declared, what was needed was more diversity and solidarity.

This was said by an SPD minister whose party supports the so-called “master plan” against foreigners drawn up by Interior Minister Horst Seehofer of the Christian Social Union (CSU). The plan is a scheme for locking up immigrants in camps, where they can be bureaucratically abused and deported as quickly as possible. Last year, in the previous grand coalition government, then-Justice Minister Heiko Maas had attacked anti-G20 demonstrators in Hamburg as “left-wing extremists” and called for the holding of a “rock against the left” concert.

At the demonstration, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party—SGP) distributed many thousands of leaflets with the headline “The fight against right-wing terror requires a socialist perspective.” At two information stands, the SGP announced the publication of a new book titled *Why are they back? Historical falsification, political conspiracy and the return of fascism in Germany*. The book attracted great interest and sparked many discussions.

A young woman who had come to the demonstration with her mother from Luckenwalde in Brandenburg expressed great concern over the strengthening of the AfD and the increase in right-wing violence. “I think it is high time to fight right-wing tendencies and violence,” she said. “It is already the case that too much is accepted that is inhuman. We saw in World War II where that leads. In my opinion, we can see the beginnings here. We have to oppose that.”

Another demonstrator said she was participating in the protest to deliver on a promise she had made to her grandmother that she would never again experience such terrible events as she had experienced in her lifetime.

In many discussions, the right-wing policies of the grand coalition came up. It is widely understood that the establishment of a system of camps and the brutal deportation of refugees means that the government has adopted the slogan of the AfD, “Foreigners Out!”

A young man from Frankfurt am Main, who did not want to give his

name for fear of reprisals, expressed indignation at the government's policy. The treatment of refugees was "completely unacceptable," he said. It was also "unacceptable that those who wanted to help refugees were treated like criminals," he added. One had to assume, he continued, that in the next few years, because of the effects of climate change and the exploitation of the countries of Africa and the Middle East, more migrants would be forced to leave their homelands.

People are outraged by the fact that more than 1,500 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean this year alone, and the German government and European Union are under such conditions constantly tightening their refugee policies. This was made clear by banners such as "Sea Rescue is Not a Crime."

Michael said he was "appalled and angry" about the situation. The sealing off of Europe's borders meant the government was allowing "hundreds of refugees to drown in the Mediterranean, which is terrible."

He stressed that the government's inhumane policy was directed not only against refugees, but also against its own people. While "billions of euros" were being spent on arming the military, "there is just as little money left for refugees as for healthcare, kindergartens and many other social needs," Michael said.

At the closing rally, when it was announced from the platform that there were also SPD officials and leaders of the Left Party and the Greens present, there were loud whistles and boos. Maya, a sales assistant from East Berlin, said angrily that it was "unheard of for the SPD to be demonstrating here while it carries out in government exactly the policy that is being protested against."

Overall, the protest was characterized by a marked contradiction. While many demonstrators were outraged by the AfD, the growth of neo-fascist forces and the right-wing policies of the government, and were looking for a way to counter this, most of those addressing the rally sought to calm things down and de-escalate the situation. Their key words were harmony, reconciliation and neighbourly love.

In his speech, the secretary-general of the German section of Amnesty International, Markus Beeko, referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was passed almost 70 years ago. This guaranteed, he said, "universal and indivisible rights to every human being on this earth." The right to think and say what you want, to believe who you want, to be protected from torture or persecution, to marry whomever you love—it was "a great idea" for which it was worthwhile getting involved.

The Protestant theologian and Berlin General Superintendent Ulrike Trautwein emphasized that hate damages social coexistence. She pointed to the peaceful demonstrations in East Germany in the autumn of 1989. At that time, a common slogan was "no violence." The pastor exclaimed, "That should connect us today! No violence!" She said she feared that racism and anti-Semitism could make social violence socially acceptable again.

Jutta Weduwen, executive director of the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ASF), also expressed concern over the increase in social conflict and warned against "eroding solidarity and cold feelings."

Many protesters responded to such calls for harmony with unease or hostility. This sentiment clearly emerged in a conversation with a couple from Berlin, Hannah and Mathew, who marched while wheeling their child in a pram. "I'm not as full of love as keeps being stressed here," said Mathew, who comes from Scotland and is studying in Berlin. "When I see the right-wing extremists on the rise again, I'm angry. What I miss in all the speeches is a fight—not

violence, but a political struggle."

"It's not all about love," added Hannah, who has already completed her biology studies. "The cause of the problems is capitalism and the constant intensification of exploitation. We need a left-wing movement that fights against the existing system and does more than say love one another, be nice to each other. What is missing is a vision, a political idea."

The demonstration Saturday was marked by the fact that very different positions on the fight against right-wing extremists and neo-fascists existed side by side. But it can already be seen that the aggravation of social conflicts will very quickly lead to a political differentiation.

The intervention of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei was directed toward preparing the next stage of the struggle and making clear that the fight against the right requires a struggle against capitalism and therefore a socialist perspective.

The SGP has shown in recent years how the rise of the AfD and the neo-fascists was ideologically prepared. It has fought against efforts to downplay the crimes of German imperialism and the Nazi regime by professors such as Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler at Humboldt University. It has warned of and exposed the return of German militarism. It has fought to mobilize the working class against these developments and their source in the capitalist system and all of its political parties and apologists, including the supposedly "left" organizations such as the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens.

The SGP leaflet to the demonstrators states: "The only social force that can counter this development and stop the right wing is the international working class. For this reason, we call for the expansion of working class struggles across the continent. The conspiracy of the grand coalition, the intelligence services and right-wing extremists must be ended.

"It is time to revive the revolutionary socialist traditions of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Lenin and Trotsky, defended only by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections. The SGP calls on workers and young people to join and to take up the fight against capitalism, fascism and war."



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