

Germany: Tens of thousands demonstrate in Berlin against high rents

Our reporters
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On Saturday, about 40,000 people protested in Berlin against dramatically rising rents. The protest was called by the Alliance against Repression and Rent Madness, which has brought together more than 270 groups and organizations.

There were similar demonstrations in numerous other German cities. More than 55,000 people took to the streets in a total of 19 cities, including Bochum, Dresden, Frankfurt, Jena and Stuttgart.

In Berlin, the demonstration started at Alexanderplatz, the seat of the Berliner Landesbank. From there, the kilometre-long demonstration marched across Karl-Marx-Allee through Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg—two districts that are massively affected by gentrification and skyrocketing rents—to the Arena grounds. This is where the Berlin real estate fair was taking place at the same time.

The demand for the expropriation of real estate companies was at the centre of the demonstration and met with tremendous support among workers and young people. “Depending on the survey, just under 40 to more than 50 percent of Berlin are behind it,” complained the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* in an article. The house organ of the Swiss banks wrote in worried terms, “Thirty years after the implosion of the GDR [East Germany], Berlin is thinking about the ‘socialization’ of real estate companies. In Berlin, the class struggle is flaring up.”

The growing anti-capitalist sentiments among workers and young people, and in parts of the middle class, were omnipresent at the demonstration. The many posters and signs carried slogans such as: “Your wealth is our lack of housing,” “Expropriate rather than buy,” “The problem is called capitalism” and “Tenants of all countries unite!” Representatives of the establishment parties and the trade unions were almost invisible on the protest. They vehemently reject the expropriation of “rent sharks” without compensation, let alone a socialist housing policy. This also applies to the Left Party.

Sven Wurm, a candidate of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) in the

European elections, warned in a video statement at the demonstration that the Left Party was preparing another “fraud.” First, as part of the Berlin state government, together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), it had privatized more than 100,000 apartments and made it possible for the big corporations to make incredible profits. Now that the value of these apartments has increased 17-fold, the Left Party is calling for expropriation. But this should be with €30 billion in compensation. That is not expropriation, it is a gift to the rich at the expense of the working class.”

The SGP is the only party “demanding the expropriation without compensation of all large housing corporations,” Wurm emphasized. But workers are “not only confronted with profit-hungry corporations and corrupt government parties.” In the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, “not a single social problem can be resolved without breaking the power of the banks and corporations. Whether it’s housing shortages, social inequality, rearmament, war or dictatorship, each of these issues requires mobilizing the international working class based on a revolutionary, socialist programme.”

The SGP’s intervention at the demonstration was well received. Members and supporters distributed thousands of copies of the statement “For the expropriation without compensation of rent sharks!” and promoted the SGP’s launch event for the European elections. The SGP information desk at Alexanderplatz received many visitors. The rent question led to interesting discussions over growing social inequality, the threat of war, the rise of the far right and the need for a socialist counteroffensive.

Ulrike and Birgit came along with three tenants’ groups from Schöneberg, an inner-city district in the west of Berlin, which is currently being increasingly gentrified. Fortunately, their street, Hohenfriedbergstraße, was under environmental protection, the two reported. This offers a certain protection, but not really very much. The buildings of the two other tenants’ groups, who had come to the demonstration together with them, did not even have this small advantage.

“Tenants’ apartments are being sold off individually,” said Ulrike. “Tenants have a right of first refusal for seven years, and then?”—Yes, and who has the money to buy a condominium?” interjected her neighbour. “At my age, firstly, I don’t want to tie myself to a loan, and second, I probably wouldn’t get one anyway.” The big, beautiful old houses were being “pulled apart” by the investors, said Birgit. “They get real money when they sell the apartments individually.”

If housing units are under “environmental protection” the Berlin districts have a right of first refusal. However, Schöneberg district has only made use of it five times. The investor, according to Birgit and Ulrike, also takes legal action against the right of first refusal. “Now everything is in limbo,” said Ulrike. “Nobody knows what will happen next. There is enormous uncertainty. And nothing is being fixed at the building. For six weeks now, the lighting in the hallway has been broken. I can only go out with a flashlight when it’s dark. We have four seniors in the property, so I always accompany my more than 80-year-old neighbour through the stairwell with a flashlight. What if he fell over?”

“There are certain fundamental rights,” said Ulrike and Birgit. “And that includes the right to a home.”

Christine from the Berlin district of Wedding considers the expropriation of the big real estate companies to be “totally correct.” The building in which she lives was first sold and then systematically “rented out.” She was the only remaining tenant and is literally being terrorized. “Massive renovations began without any announcement. There was also some water damage three weeks ago and I have the impression that it was deliberately initiated to get me out of my apartment. My nerves are being shredded by all the noise and dirt.”

Ulrike carries a poster showing the massive increase in her rent over the past 30 years. “This goes from one mark [a square metre] in the GDR in 1986—my first apartment in Berlin-Friedrichshain—until today. Now, I’m paying just under eight euros [a square metre] in Weissensee. I can still pay the rent, but you don’t know how things will go in the future.” She also wanted to “protest for everyone who was not doing so well. It is getting more and more unfair. Maybe there’s something wrong with capitalism,” she added.

Mathilde is from Italy but has been living in Berlin for six years. “Since then, I’ve seen how housing costs have developed. I’m here because I want to demonstrate against profit gouging, speculation and the exploitation of people, no matter where they come from.” Asked about her sign “Capitalism is the problem,” Mathilde explains, “Capitalism is based on making profits and not on human rights. And having somewhere to live is a human right.”

Asked about the situation in her homeland, Mathilde says,

“The situation in Italy is really dramatic. Some things are worse than I thought could ever happen. When [Silvio] Berlusconi was in government, I thought, that was the worst. And now it’s a hundred times worse. I am thinking of the refugees, above all. [Matteo] Salvini is now stopping their ships from landing at all. And people are dying from that. The right-wingers channel fear and hatred towards all strangers. But these people are fleeing from wars, which the West started in the first case. It’s scary when politicians say, ‘They just steal our jobs. They are drug dealers,’ and stuff like that. Such politicians should resign.”

Axel thinks the same thing about politics in this country. “We don’t need a (greedy) government in the service of the lobbyists,” is written on his sign. “The situation in Berlin is tense and it is becoming increasingly aggressive. The latest trick is that of fictional ancillary costs, which hardly anyone can understand, whereby rents are increased beyond the rent index.” He is aware of the role of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party, as most protesters are. “Our SPD world champion [former Berlin governing mayor Klaus] Wowereit and the SPD-Left Party Senate [Berlin state executive] have been a big part of it. They are all in cahoots with the financial clique.”

When the conversation turned to the government’s armaments policy, Axel recounted how he had witnessed the end of the Second World War as a child. For decades, he could not have imagined that Germany would once again be rearming and that a far-right party would move into the Bundestag [parliament]. “But with [German] reunification, it all came back to the fore. ‘The one Germany with 80 million. We are big. We are strong,’” was being said once again. “And the crux of it is that even countries like France and Poland are demanding we increase our defence budget.”



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