Right-wing outcry over student protest against anti-Muslim “headscarf conference” at German university

16 May 2019

Protests by students against an anti-Muslim “headscarf conference” held at Frankfurt’s Goethe University on May 8 have prompted hysterical responses from university management, the media, and politicians.

The course of events in Frankfurt followed a familiar pattern: legitimate criticism of right-wing and racist positions was criminalised and denounced as “attacks on academic freedom,” “speech bans” and “ideological terror” so as to shift the political climate on university campuses farther to the right.

The conference on the topic of “The Islamic headscarf: Symbol of dignity or oppression?” was organised by Professor Susanne Schröter. The founder and director of the Frankfurt Research Center on Global Islam, principal investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Formation of Normative Orders” and professor of social and cultural anthropology at Goethe University, Schröter is by no means an unknown quantity. She appears regularly as an “Islamist expert” for the state criminal police in Hesse.

Several months ago, Schröter invited the right-wing ideologist Rainer Wendt, Federal Chairman of the German Police Union, to give a lecture at the university on “Everyday policing in an immigration society.” However, she was forced to withdraw the Wendt invite following protests. She made clear her attitude to the “headscarf” in comments to the TAZ newspaper: she believes it is a “systemic symbol for something repressive.”

The conference was also organised with the support of Hesse’s Minister for Social Affairs and Integration, Kai Klose (Greens). Schröter invited the feminist Alice Schwarzer and the frontwoman of the group Terre des Femmes (Women’s Earth), Necla Kelek to speak.

Schwarzer specialises in converting prejudice against Muslim men into anti-immigrant agitation. Even the title of her speech, “From Tehran to Neuköl: The triumphant march of politicised Islam, not least thanks to false tolerance,” was reminiscent of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Pegida.

Kelek used the occasion to appeal for support for her petition to “ban headscarves for children at school and at training centres.”

The journalist Khola Maryam Hübsch was the only speaker out of seven who opposed the conference’s overall agenda. Hübsch told the TAZ, “I don’t think the panel was balanced. The speaking time was dominated by those who take extreme positions against the headscarf ... Susanne Schröter allowed herself and her position in academia to be used to spread fear and blatant clichés.”

Protests against the conference emerged prior to its taking place. Using the hashtag #Schröter_raus (Schröter_out), the group “Uni against AMR” (anti-Muslim racism) posted pictures on Instagram featuring students holding up signs. The signs included “No place for anti-Muslim racism,” “Because we can speak for ourselves” and “Because my headscarf is my business.”

Zuher Jazmati, a spokesperson for the protest group, criticised the invitation extended to Schwarzer, and explained his opposition to Deutsche Welle, “We do not believe a value judgment ought to be made on whether or not someone wears a veil. Making such a judgment is annoying for and a burden on any woman wearing one.” Jazmati also suggested that such gatherings encouraged violence against Muslim women.

Although the Instagram page was closed down

© World Socialist Web Site

shortly after appearing, university management, the media and even the Frankfurt student council responded with outrage. They claimed that the group name #Schröter_raus represented an attack on freedom of speech, and accused the students of "ideological terror" and organising a "hate campaign."

In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Heike Schmoll wondered whether the limits of "free speech and free thinking" had been reached, and warned against "digital ideological terror." The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* raged that the criticism of the conference shows that "denunciation, masquerading as outrage, has become common sense in some circles ... Where does this anger, this indolence, this hatred towards those who still wish to make use of the right to freedom of thought come from?"

Dieter Sattler, political editor of the *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, complained in the *Höchste Kreisblatt* that for "left-wing students," even conservative politicians like Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU) or the right-wing Green Party member Boris Palmer are considered right-wing extremists.

Many of the same newspapers and journalists, including Heike Schmoll, participated in the campaign against the Trotskyist youth and student movement, the IYSSE, which criticised the right-wing extremist Professor Jörg Baberowski, among other things for his statement that "Hitler was not vicious." Unsurprisingly, Baberowski himself intervened in the latest controversy, writing that "as many professors as possible should stand up for the colleague [Schröter]."

Alternative for Germany (AfD) parliamentary deputy Götz Frömming drew a direct connection between the criticisms of Baberowski and the headscarf conference. He wrote on his Facebook page, "Schröter, Baberowski, Münkler and co.: Defend academic freedom!"

The Frankfurt student council also endorsed the campaign. Its feminism spokesperson Fatma Keser told the Hessenschau, the region's flagship news programme, that Schröter's work was "important" and the conference had to go ahead. On Deutschlandfunk, Keser declared that she was "confused" by Schröter's invitation to people like theologian and Quranic expert

Dr. Dina el Omari and Khola Maryam Hübsch. "I wouldn't invite these people. The student council is perhaps even more radical on this point than Schröter," she said.

The student council previously invited the AfD supporter Thomas Maul to give a lecture. By contrast, it cancelled an already approved meeting organised by the IYSSE on the actuality of Marxism with the slanderous accusation that the IYSSE was anti-Semitic.

The "headscarf conference" ultimately went ahead in the "Normative Orders" building on the Max-Horkheimer-Straße, shielded from the public by a police security cordon. Ordinary listeners were only permitted to listen to the event via a livestream broadcast to a separate lecture theatre. Those with critical opinions were not permitted to attend. So much for "academic freedom."

In front of the building, a group of young people braved the torrential rain and protested with signs reading "Decolonise the university," "My body my choice," and "Let us speak for ourselves." Alice Schwarzer, who appeared briefly outside the building during the lunch break, disappeared swiftly after protesters challenged her to speak.

Kamila, a student in Frankfurt, commented on the accusation that her protest threatened academic freedom, "We have never demanded that certain things should not be discussed or researched—on the contrary. But we don't want scholarship to be co-opted in this way by the right-wing. That's not scholarship, it's right-wing propaganda. A university professor shouldn't work in this way, because she is just promoting the AfD."

The reality is that the AfD is being deliberately promoted. Even though it secured just 12.6 percent of the vote at the last federal election, the AfD sets the tone for government policy, and refugee policy in particular. The ruling elite is desperately seeking to contain the opposition to its right-wing, militarist and racist policies. This is why an unrestrained campaign of intimidation has been unleashed against students who posted critical comments on Instagram.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site