

Students at Dresden School of Art protest against the far-right AfD

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Students at the Dresden School of Art (Hochschule für bildende Künste, HfBK) protested last week against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The students expressed their opposition to “the creeping acceptance of right-wing content” and demanded that the university management make clear its adherence to the principle of artistic freedom and its opposition to right-wing extremism.

The HfBK, founded in 1764, is one of the oldest and most renowned universities in Germany. Its reputation is inextricably linked to outstanding artists such as Otto Dix, George Grosz, Oskar Kokoschka, Conrad Felixmüller, and other socially committed, antimilitarist, and socialist artists of the early 20th century.

The trigger for the protests was the candidacy of the library director Barbara Lenk for the AfD in a local election in nearby Meissen. Students occupied the library for a day on May 29 and put up banners pointing out the incompatibility of freedom of art and education with the program of the AfD. “HfBK or AfD—you cannot have both,” read one banner hanging from the window of the university.

Other banners drew attention to the long-standing hostility of the AfD and its affiliated Pegida movement towards artists. One of the AfD’s recent election posters demanded: “Not a penny for politically motivated art,” and its state election program makes clear that this refers to all art that does not promote the nationalist, racist, homophobic and other reactionary views of the neofascist party.

The draft of the AfD program states: “Culture must not be a playground for sociocultural clientele politics.” The program draft accuses theatres in the state of Saxony of practicing “a one-sided politically oriented, educational music and speech theatre.” Against this

background, the fears of students and the demands they raised are absolutely justified. As it itself proclaims, the AfD is motivated by the fact that many artists and cultural institutions in Dresden have expressed support for cultural tolerance in general and immigrants and refugees specifically, as well as opposition to racism and nationalism.

The protest is not only directed against the far-right views of the AfD. University students fear for their own safety. Dresden student representative Madlyn Sauer told German radio (Deutschlandfunk Kultur) that the library director has “access to the sensitive data of students and employees, via addresses, e-mail addresses, mobile phones. And given that there are a number of politically active students, as well as students from a different cultural background whom the AfD regard as their enemies, we are of course very worried as to whether she can be really trusted with the data.”

After calling a general meeting, 300 students voted to occupy the library. Following discussions with the university management, the occupation ended on the same afternoon. The university management agreed to the demand by students to publicise a declaration by the student council on the HfBK website.

The declaration expressed concern about “movements and opinions which have been developed and promoted in particular in the Free State of Saxony... We cannot leave uncommented events such as those which took place in Chemnitz and the continuous slogans of the (far-right) PEGIDA.” The statement continues, “As more and more links are revealed between the ruling executive in the state and the legislature, we fear restrictions on our freedom and work in this election year.” Elections in Saxony are to be held later this year.

Further talks between the university leadership and

students have been agreed. In the meantime, the students have announced further actions, such as flash mobs, video projects, and research into the history of the university during the period of the Nazis, which, much like AfD, attacked what Hitler called “degenerate art.”

Comments expressed by the university rector, Matthias Flügge, make clear, however, that the students at the HfBK face an uphill struggle. The press release by the university leadership stresses its supposed “political neutrality.” Party political commitment on the part of employees is not the concern of the university management unless “it is certain that the party in question is anti-constitutional.” According to Flügge, the head of the university library is “an outstanding employee. On this basis, I stand behind her and will not tolerate bullying.” The fact that Flügge “as a person takes a very different political path is a completely different matter.”

Chancellor Jochen Beißert told Deutschlandfunk that he had made clear in an interview with Barbara Lenk that her candidacy for the AfD candidacy was her right, but that she had to assure her office’s “neutrality and, of course, defend the liberal-democratic constitution.”

In other words, the university administration considers the AfD to be legitimate up until the point that Germany’s domestic intelligence agency, the BfV, classifies it as “anti-constitutional.” But the BfV is itself closely involved with far-right networks. This is confirmed by a glimpse at the recently published intelligence agency report for the state of Saxony. The report fails to identify either the AfD or Pegida as far-right organisations. They are only mentioned in the report as the victims of left-wing extremists.

On the other hand, the antifascist punk band Feine Sahne Fischfilet, which played at the “Rock against the Right Wing” concert, following a neo-Nazi march in Chemnitz, is branded in the report as “left-wing extremist.” The secret service report goes so far as to denounce the concert for providing a platform to left-wing extremists.

The right-wing extremist blog Tichy's Insight, which claims to be directed towards the country’s “liberal-conservative elite” celebrated the stance taken by the leadership of the HfBK. “The rector, the chancellor, and the library commissioner, regardless of their personal political beliefs, all stood behind Lenk,” the

fascist publication boasted. The blog then accused students of promoting “ideological terror” and declared that their criticism of the AfD candidacy by the head of the library amounted to “slander, coercion, extortion and, ultimately, defamation.”

The events at the HfBK in Dresden confirm that the AfD and right-wing extremist ideologies are being protected at German universities. The events in Dresden resemble the response to the Trotskyist youth and student organisation, the IYSSE, at Berlin’s Humboldt University after it criticised the right-wing extremist historian Jörg Baberowski. Baberowski, who seeks to relative the crimes of Hitler and the Third Reich and promotes German imperialism, has been sheltered by Humboldt, while the IYSSE has been censured.



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