Germany: New higher education law in North Rhine-Westphalia allows military research

Inti Gomez, Philipp Frisch
26 August 2019

The ruling coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) passed a new Higher Education Law on July 11. The law is a far-reaching attack on students and teachers at NRW universities in particular but ultimately against the interests of the working class as a whole.

The focus of the law is the abolition of the Civil Clause, which proscribes research for military purposes. Section three of the hitherto pertinent law stated: "Universities develop their contribution to a sustainable, peaceful and democratic world. They are committed to peaceful goals and pursue their special responsibility for sustainable development both internally and externally."

The decision to remove the clause is a milestone in the re-militarization of German universities and serves as a signal to the defence and security apparatus to more intensively involve universities in the preparation of "Great Power Conflicts."

Since 2014, when leading German politicians demanded the "end of military restraint," the arming and political strengthening of the war apparatus has been systematically promoted. Recently the new minister of defence, Annagret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who had previously declared her support for a Franco-German project to construct an aircraft carrier, declared her support for the NATO's 2 percent goal and the attendant doubling of the military budget. A German aircraft carrier would ultimately require technical development at German research centres.

The blueprint for this course of action was provided in 2013 by the government-associated think tank Foundation for Science and Politic (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP) in the publication "New Power—New Responsibility" (Neue Macht—Neue Verantwortung). The document calls for the erection of a "thought landscape" that is "in a position to develop political options quickly and in operational form." One of the options, as stated in the paper, is the "use of military force." Universities and research institutions are explicitly understood to be part of this "thought landscape."

The Civil Clause was anchored in the Higher Education Law in September 2014 by the red-green (SPD-Green) state government of the time. The measure was intended to give the SPD and Greens, who have played a key role in the implementation of military missions abroad since the Kosovo War, a semblance of anti-militarism.

From the start, the clause had a primarily symbolic character, doing nothing to change the fact that research was being conducted in NRW universities for military purposes. As shown by research in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, third-party funds had flowed since 2008 to the tune of $21.7 million from the US Defense Department directly to German universities, including in NRW.

The RWTH Aachen, a member of the "Excellence Universities" initiative, obtained at least $1,220,190. The two largest individual grants, each around $210,000, were disbursed between April 2018 and the beginning of 2019 in spite of the Civil Clause.

As in other cases, the RWTH justified the obvious influence of the military with the claim of "dual use." Civil research could also be used for military purposes. Faith must be placed in "the sense of responsibility of our scientists," according to RWTH Rector Ulrich Rüdiger.

According to research by the *Stern* and the investigative platform *Correctiv*, in 2016 a "feasibility study" for a tank factory in Karasu on the Turkish Black Sea coast was produced by the RWTH in cooperation with both the arms producer Rheinmetall as well as with their Turkish partner BMC.

Such grants and research projects are now being legitimized and expanded. The NRW state government presents the new Higher Education Law, which will go into force in October 2019, as a means of returning "the possibility of autonomous and self-determined conception" to the universities.

Culture and Science Minister Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen (independent), who worked on the law since taking on her position in June 2017, declared that the changes strengthened "the quality of research and teaching for

© World Socialist Web Site

students."

Aside from the abolition of the Civil Clause, the law contains significant social attacks that will have serious impact on already disadvantaged students. For example, binding course of study agreements were renewed and attendance obligations were reintroduced.

Both of these particularly affect students who must work in addition to their studies in order to earn living expenses as well as make payments to the universities. Students with children, disabilities or chronic illnesses will be particularly affected by these regulations.

The law was met with protest from both students as well as in a significant portion of the staff. Even while the law was still being passed in parliament and—even though during the exam period—hundreds of students protested in front of the parliament building. Over 5,000 signatories expressed their dissent in a signature campaign.

As early as March of this year the Fachschaft Physics (representative body of students of physics) of the University of Cologne issued a statement expressing their rejection of the new Higher Education Law. Under the title "The UzK [University of Cologne] cannot dispense with a legal Civil Clause and therefore must campaign for its preservation!" it emphasized that the Civil Clause in the Higher Education Law does not contradict freedom of scholarship, rather protects "science from instrumentalization for inhumane goals." The statement added, "This applies all the more in light of the far-reaching rearmament plans, the questioning of climate protection goals and the associated third-party funding offers."

Around two dozen additional student organizations at the University of Cologne subscribed to the statement. Students of many other universities had expressed their opposition to the new law in similar manner.

Many educators likewise joined the protest against the new Higher Education Law. In May, the Institute for Education Science at the University of Duisburg-Essen published its "Positioning for the Preservation of the Civil Clause in the Higher Education Law of the State of NRW." This clearly rejects the "economic appropriation" of the universities and "any application for and execution of research for military purposes" because "a Civil Clause anchored in the Higher Education Law is a necessary requirement to understanding the peaceful mission of the universities, beyond defending them against military intervention, as a positive developmental task."

Although the SPD and Greens in parliament voted against the new law—fully aware that their votes would not affect its passage—their student organizations on campus (Jusos and campus:grün) maintained silence. Only after the passage of the law, the campus:grün declared that it will "critically accompany" the "implementation" of the "bad black-yellow" [CDU-FDP] Higher Education Law. While the Greens in the Bundestag (federal parliament) regularly demand "better provisioning" for the Bundeswehr (army) and a more offensive stance against Russia, their representatives in the universities declare their readiness to implement these policies with just a pinch of "criticism."

This is the way these organizations are attempting to protect the entry of the military into the universities from criticism. The Greens as well as the Left Party (die Linke) have supported the return of German militarism from the beginning.

Just like the SPD and the Greens, the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) in parliament also voted against the law. The AfD fears an "Anglo-Americanization" of the German higher education system. Helmut Seifen, the state leader of the AfD who resigned his post last month after leading the state parliament's Science Committee that significantly influenced the law, explicitly welcomed other aspects of the new law.

It applies not only to the abolition of the Civil Clause because, "the World," as Seifen stated in the final debate, "is not made up of peaceful idealists." Seifen praised Paragraph 51a of the new law explicitly as a step against the "increasingly intolerable restrictions of the range of opinions." The paragraph enumerates a long list of "regulatory offenses" that may lead to anything from a reprimand to compulsory ex-matriculation.

Seifen left no doubt that the Paragraph 51a is aimed against student critics of right-wing professors and AfD members in universities: "We welcome explicitly that soon in the universities not all doors will be open to the militant arm of the Antifa … to prevent scientific discourse."

Extreme right-wing professors like Jörg Baberowski ("Hitler was not vicious") from Berlin's Humboldt University have continually demanded that their critics among the students be thrown out of the university. The new Higher Education Law in North Rhine-Westphalia will enable just such action.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site