Erfurt, Germany: 20,000 demonstrate against fascism

Our correspondents
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"Not with us! No pact with fascists—never and nowhere!" This was the main slogan for the mass demonstration which took place in the east German city of Erfurt on Saturday, February 15. The election of a premier in the state of Thuringia ten days earlier with the combined votes of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) once again confirmed the readiness of the German ruling elite to collaborate with fascists.

"This is an unacceptable breach of a taboo," was the comment by a group from Nordheim participating in the demonstration. They told WSWS reporters that such "behind the scenes manoeuvring with fascists was unacceptable."

"How dare you—how dare you form such alliances?" protested Esther Bejarano in a statement read out from the platform of the demo in Erfurt. The declaration by the 95-year-old musician, concentration camp survivor and chair of the Auschwitz Committee summed up the angry mood of demonstrators and ended with the statement: "In fact the Nazis never went away."

Over 18,000 people gathered on the city's Domplatz to protest against fascism. They then marched through the capital city of Thuringia, passing by the state chancellery. An additional 2,000 assembled on the same day to prevent a march by neo-Nazis from across Europe who had gathered in the city of Dresden.

Dozens of organisations had issued an appeal to attend the rally in Erfurt. They included trade unions, groups close to the Left Party, as well as naturalist organisations, Jewish, immigrant, youth and pensioner groups ("Grannies against the far right") and numerous anti-fascist initiatives, many from the states of Thuringia and Saxony.

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) attended and distributed 3,000 copies of a statement, "The fight against the AfD requires a socialist perspective." The leaflet referred to the case of the radical right-wing Berlin professor Jörg Baberowski ("Hitler was not vicious"), who not only enjoys the protection of Berlin's renowned Humboldt University, but also that of the German government. Many of the participants in Erfurt had heard about the case and were keen to find out more.

Speakers at the rally from the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB), the IG Metall trade union and from the churches concentrated their fire on the position taken by the CDU and FDP. Many of those taking part, however, were motivated by a rejection not only of fascism, but also of the capitalist system which gives rise to fascism and also criticised the role of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party.

Gerhard, a pensioner from Saarland, said he saw parallels between former Thuringia premier Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) and Winfried Kretschmann (the Green Party premier in Baden-Württemberg). "Nothing has changed with capitalism, and Ramelow is not a socialist. As soon as these people become premiers, they inevitably serve capitalism."

Gerhard pointed out links with key social questions and said: "The AfD has benefited from the fact that all of the parties neglect ordinary people. High rents, unemployment, all of the social issues are increasingly being sidelined, and nobody cares. Instead, billions are put into the military."

Silvia from Erfurt also saw the rise of right-wing extremists in connection with growing social inequality: "Behind the AfD are millionaires and businessmen who fund the party with large sums," she said. "Politicians are holding the right-wing radicals in reserve because they might need them."

The same strategy applied to right-wing extremist networks in the police and military: "They are not being exposed and dealt with because the intention was not to expose them in the first place." After WWII "there was never any proper reckoning made with the Nazi history," Silvia said, "and now we are paying the price."

Thousands of young people took part in the day of protest, including **Celine, Evion, Evelin, Line and Miriam**, all students in the "International Relations" department at the University of Erfurt. "We deal with these issues every day. We are experiencing here the importance of taking to the streets, raising one's voice and taking a stand together against the right wing. We want to show that we are not prepared to tolerate them."

They regard the election of the Thuringia premier with the votes of the AfD as "an absolute breach of a taboo. If you regard such an event as normal and do nothing and don't demonstrate, then we will land again in the situation as it was prior to World War II. You have to be extremely vigilant. Otherwise, such developments creep back and are taken for granted, suddenly at some point you are back in a right-wing dictatorship."

Hans and Isa, who also study in Erfurt, stated that the events in Thuringia represented "an attack on democracy and demonstrated the brittleness of political culture in Germany." In Thuringia the Left Party had won the most votes and in any new election would win more. "When the CDU and FDP make a deal with the AfD, then they are clearly disregarding the will of the electorate. We have to show politicians they can't just do what they want. We are the public watching them closely," Hans concluded.

Lisa, Lennard and Hilja study political and social sciences at the Georg August University in Göttingen. They were angry about claims of parallels between former Thuringia premier Bodo Ramelow and the former leader of Stalinist East Germany, Erich Honecker. Ramelow "is being portrayed as someone worse than the AfD, and that cannot be allowed to stand. Those arguing in such a way always describe themselves as 'ordinary citizens,' from 'the middle of society.' But where is the 'middle of society'? To be on the left means standing up for liberal values, those on the right oppose such values. I don't understand where there is any sort of middle. One has to think it through."

The group agreed "that a party like the Left Party should not be equated with the AfD" and thought that new elections would be the best solution. They doubted this would happen, however, and that was why it was so important for people to take to the streets.

WSWS reporters showed the students from Göttingen the video showing

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HU professor Baberowski attacking a representative of IYSSE. The students were already aware of the incident and were very interested in joining the opposition to the shift to the right at universities, which is being promoted by the ruling elite.

Gisela from Weimar considered the causes of the emergence and rise of the AfD to be "complex." She referred to the social division of society. Many people felt left behind, especially in the countryside: "I think this is a problem in both East and West. Rural structures are under pressure everywhere. There are no bus connections, no local supplies in villages, few jobs—a lot of issues come together."

Gisela is active in a citizens' alliance against the right wing because she believes it is important to get involved in democratic structures. "This is an urgent issue in state politics today," she said. "I find all this whispering and murmuring behind closed doors, the deals struck and the aggression with which the AfD assumes political power is inappropriate and I am against it." Gisela hoped the demonstration would be a "powerful sign for democracy and against nationalism and hateful agitation." She said she found the threat of war emerging in world politics particularly "depressing."

Sarah had come from the neighbouring state of Hesse with two self-made placards. She said: "I fear the return of the fascists in the mask of democrats." There is a danger that "reactionary groups like the AfD use democratic means to pose as ordinary citizens, penetrate democracy and then gradually dismantle it from above. That is my big fear. This turning point in Thuringia indicated that this is once again possible and that's why I'm here."

When the WSWS reporters pointed out the deliberate actions of the established parties aimed at making the AfD respectable Sarah answered that she saw the reasons for this "in the basic attitude of society": "If society represented different values than it does, then the AfD would never come to hold this power."

When asked what values she was thinking of primarily, Sarah replied: "I am alarmed about the way in which inhumane things are openly spoken about, how whole groups are discriminated against and how this is justified." She was increasingly concerned that such things can be rendered normal and said in Parliament, thereby acquiring a certain "validity and justification."

In this context, WSWS reporters described the resistance of the students at Berlin's Humboldt University, where right-wing extremist ideologies are being revived. Professor Baberowski from the Institute for Eastern European History portrays the crimes of the Nazis as a legitimate reaction to the resistance waged by Soviet partisans, described Hitler in a *Spiegel* interview in 2014 as "not vicious" and recently even tore down posters for the student parliamentary elections posted by the socialist IYSSE. In the course of this action he also physically assaulted a student.

"Such statements are becoming more and more common," Sarah said. One should not ignore something like this "because it leads to murder, it leads to deaths, it leads to violence."

A friend of Sarah explained "the fact that the right-wing extremist terror group NSU was able to kill unhindered for years" is bound up with "those in the the legal system and police who sympathise with the far right." She sees a major problem in that such actions are accepted and tolerated by sections of the population because they are "only" directed against minorities. The problem is the "racist basis" of society: "The police and judiciary permitted the NSU for ideological reasons ... The question is who the constitutional state protects and which people receive more protection. All people are equal, but some are more equal than others."

"Above all, these actions are always treated as an individual case," was the estimation of both of them regarding the murder of the CDU politician Walter Lübcke last June. "It is about a network that is still continuing its business."

The attack on a synagogue in Halle on October 9, 2019, also took place "in connection with this network which has still not been exposed," said Sarah's friend. The members of the right-wing terrorist network "are always protected anew. No attention is paid to their supporters. They could be much more exposed if it were recognised that it is not about individual offenders and psychopaths, but rather established right-wing radical structures."

"The structures are in fact known, but they are let off free," Sarah said. She concluded with the hope that the demonstration "would motivate everyone to take to the streets and not be intimidated."

The far-right networks, which extend into the police, army and intelligence services, were a central theme in other parts of the demonstration. Young people from Zwickau carried a banner with the inscription: "Abolish the Verfassungsschutz [Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution]"—Germany's domestic intelligence agency. They told the WSWS that they were "concerned that nobody would do anything to break up the right-wing networks."

Ella, a young woman from the Vogtland region, explained: "One has the impression that the fascists are being tolerated because they may be needed again." She pointed out that new, undemocratic police laws are being introduced everywhere. "This is paid for out of our taxpayers' money and is then aimed against us to better control us."

Thomas from Erfurt also came to the demonstration to "prevent politicians from working together with fascists. There had to be a basic consensus among democrats based on the equality of all people," he said. This was not the case, however, with any of the political parties.

Thomas regarded the emergence of fascism as the result of a fundamental crisis of capitalism. "Today we are experiencing a tremendous structural change, for example in the automotive industry," he explained. "Digitalisation is laying off many workers in companies and there are no new jobs. Politicians fear a social uprising."

This was how he explained the existence of terrorist gangs such as the SS and SA in the Third Reich, and today the right-wing networks that extend deep into the state. "They are deliberately not being exposed," Thomas said. "If an individual like (far-right soldier) Franco A. is exposed in the media, it only serves as an alibi."

He therefore places no trust in Ramelow and the Left Party, because "they do not represent socialism. What prevailed in the GDR was Stalinism." Following the October Revolution, Stalin went on to disempower the council democracy of the young Soviet Union. "The real problem, capitalism, was ultimately not resolved," Thomas said. He was pleased to find a party called the Socialist Equality Party and eager to get to know it better.

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