Large-scale police deployment evicts alternative housing project in Berlin, Germany

Justus Leicht, Peter Schwarz
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The Berlin Senate mobilized over 2,500 police officers from across Germany to carry out evictions from a residential building on behalf of one of the capital's most infamous real estate speculators last week.

The forceful evictions from the alternative housing project "Leibig 34" last Friday shows that the supposedly left-wing parties of the city government—the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party—defend capitalist interests no less viciously than the conservatives, despite presenting themselves as defenders of renters and wage earners at election time.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) for years has demanded a renunciation of "left-red-green contaminated '68 Germany," by which it means a return to police state authoritarianism. The red-red-green Berlin Senate is now putting the AfD's perspective into practice.

The Berlin Senate's massive police deployment to evict the "anarcho-queer-feminist housing project" at number 34 Leibig Street in the Friedrichshain neighborhood was reminiscent of a scene of civil war. Even the Green-associated *taz* newspaper wrote that the police engaged "as if tasked with putting down an armed insurrection."

According to the *taz*, up to 5,000 officers were on standby to ensure the eviction, among them 19 100-man teams from other states. There were even reports of threats to deploy a heavily-armed Sondereinsatzkommando (SEK, equivalent to a SWAT team).

Ultimately, 2,500 armored police officers moved in, accompanied by an armored bulldozer, an excavator, a ladder truck and a helicopter, to evacuate the roughly 40 female residents in the house, who offered little resistance. The 1,500 protesters reported by police to have gathered in opposition to the eviction likewise remained largely peaceful.

Immediately following the eviction, police led journalists through the private rooms of the displaced to provide right-wing propaganda about filth and neglect—as if the residents had the chance to tidy up during the forceful eviction.

A protest, hours later and far from the evacuated house, was exploited for propaganda purposes. The Berlin press was in a tizzy over broken windows and burning cars, for which the autonomous Black Bloc—permeated with police provocateurs—was responsible. The police engaged the demonstrators with drastic violence, arresting 132 people by day's end.

The building at number 34 Liebig Street was more than a mere alternative housing project. It stood in symbolic opposition to the gentrification and real estate speculation that has made Germany's capital increasingly unaffordable for average workers, retirees and students. Housing and rental prices have exploded in recent years. The price of a rental apartment in Neukölln, part of the same district as Friedrichshain, for example, has risen nearly 150 percent in the past decade.

Big real estate enterprises, such as Deutsche Wohnen and Vonovia, which together own over ten percent of the 1.5 million rentals in Berlin, have earned billions in the last two decades.

The two companies purchased tens of thousands of publicly owned buildings for a song in the early 2000s and have been cashing in ever since, without need of significant investment in the properties themselves. The Senate, led by Klaus Wowereit, an alliance of SPD and the Left Party, sold the state-owned properties to satisfy the debts of the city and the bankrupt bank Bankgesellschaft Berlin. The Senator of Finance at the time was Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), who subsequently helped pave the way for the AfD with his publication of racist literature.

Opposition is growing among Berliners to high rents and the real estate companies. As one indication, the initiative "Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen" (expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co.), demanding a referendum for the public takeover of 240,000 apartments from real estate companies, quickly garnered 77,000 signatures. This initiative, however, is a fraud aimed at dissipating popular anger: its initiators

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are associated with the Left Party, which has again demonstrated where it stands in questions of housing by the vacating of Liebig 34.

Smaller "real estate sharks" like Gijora Padovicz, owner of the Liebig 34, play a key role in countering this opposition in the population. While the big conglomerates pull their political strings behind the scenes, Padovicz acts as the bulldog on site.

The dubious machinations of his intricate family empire, which owns at least 200 properties in Berlin, have repeatedly come to light: extortionate rent for refugees, unfounded lease terminations, forced evictions, speculative vacancies, etc. Afflicted tenants have founded the Padovicz WatchBlog, which critically tracks his corporate network and practices.

One of Padovicz' specialties is the destruction of left-wing housing projects. Before Liebig 34, projects such as 29 Scharnweber Street and 12 Kreutzig Street suffered similar fates. Tellingly, the state association of the extreme-right AfD, which had difficulty finding a landlord in Berlin, is located in an office building on Kurfürsten Street belonging to the Padovicz company network.

Padovicz acquired the property at number 34 Liebig Street in 2007. At that time, the building had already been an alternative housing project for 27 years. Like 130 other buildings in Berlin, it was occupied in 1990 as speculators and former owners swarmed like locusts to enrich themselves on the lucrative real estate of the dissolving German Democratic Republic (GDR). The tenancies were legalized soon thereafter.

Padovicz was able to buy the property cheaply because the previous owners had a falling out and auctioned off the building. Residents of the house, who offered to buy it, were outmaneuvered by various tricks. In 2008, the new owner concluded a 10-year commercial lease with the residents through the association "Raduga," which, unlike a residential lease, does not protect tenants against arbitrary eviction. Ten days after the contract expired, Padovicz gave notice to all residents of the building.

This sparked protests that extended well beyond those directly affected. Eighty-five prominent leaders of Berlin's cultural life signed an appeal stating: without its alternative housing and cultural projects, Berlin would be "socially, politically and culturally significantly poorer."

The signatories included director Leander Haußmann; the artistic directors of the Berlin Ensemble, the Berlin Festspiele and the Volksbühne Oliver Reese, Thomas Oberender and René Pollesch; the artistic director of the Schaubühne Thomas Ostermeier; the director of the Berlin State Ballet Sasha Waltz; the literature Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek as well as authors Cornelia Funke, Wladimir Kaminer, Marc-Uwe Kling, Günter Wallraff and Didier Eribon.

Ostermeier told the *taz* that "these centers of counterculture give Berlin its identity as an alternative, artistic metropolis." Margarita Tsomou from Hebbel am Ufer added that "the most interesting and novel cultural impulses originate in these spaces." Without them, Berlin runs the risk of becoming a "desolate cultural landscape because only well-heeled pseudo-creatives can afford these spaces."

Representatives of the Green and Left parties hypocritically feigned sympathy. Senator for Culture Klaus Lederer told the *taz* that such projects are "an integral part of what make up Berlin, its reputation and its cultural scene." In fact, Lederer, as a member of the Berlin Senate, is personally responsible for the brutal destruction of the housing project.

On the other hand, the Liebig 34 has received support from its neighborhood. Many local residents interpret the destruction of the project as a significant step toward further gentrification of the quarter, which will result in unpayable rents.

In the end, however, Padovicz was given cover by the judiciary. Although the property was primarily used as a residence, as reflected in the rental contract, the Berlin State Court sustained the argument of the real estate speculator that commercial law was nevertheless applicable, under which the residents were not considered people in need of shelter, rather as a company with a limited need of an office or warehouse. On June 2, 2020, the regional court granted the landlord's case for eviction.

The Berlin Senate, which supposedly has "no money" for elementary measures against the coronavirus in schools and public transport, spared no expense to help a shady speculator maintain his "rights" and to put several dozen women out on the street.

The mobilization of thousands of police officers to evict an alternative housing project must be understood as a serious warning. In the face of social tensions and the catastrophic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the ruling class is preparing to violently suppress any opposition from below. All of the parties in Parliament—from the AfD to the Left Party—are in full support of this course of action.

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