German population shows solidarity with Ukrainian refugees in Berlin, authorities display indifference

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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 2.5 million people have fled the country on foot, by car, bus or train since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24. Their main destination so far is Poland, where a large majority—more than 1.5 million people—are currently living; hundreds of thousands continue to flee to the west.

In Germany, more than 110,000 refugees from Ukraine have been officially registered since the beginning of the war. More than 80,000 refugees have officially arrived in the capital Berlin. There is no way of confirming how many so-called unreported refugees there are, i.e., people accommodated via relatives or friends.

As in 2015, when tens of thousands of people sought refuge from the wars in the Middle East, especially from Syria, working people in Berlin have responded with overwhelming solidarity from the outset, even with more than 10,000 arriving on some days.

On the other hand, the "reception structures" allegedly set up by the state government, the Berlin Senate, were initially barely visible; they have since collapsed. The images of refugees arriving at the central train station during the first days of the conflict immediately called to mind the failure of the state to deal with the 2015 refugee crisis.

At that time, the refugees stood in queues for days in the summer heat at the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (Lageso). Today it is the State Office for Refugee Affairs (LAF). They waited without water and shade to register in order to acquire the right to food and accommodation.

The fact that the catastrophe of that time has yet to be repeated is not due to the ruling parties, the Social Democrats, Left Party, and Greens. Quite the opposite!

Berlin aid organisations and hundreds of volunteers welcomed those arriving at Berlin Central Station and the Central Bus Station (ZOB), provided them with immediate necessities, took them in or organised a "bed for the night" with other supporters.

The aid organisation Moabit hilft e.V., which gained prominence around the world during the refugee crisis of 2015, openly denounced the "terrible food situation on site" at the beginning of the first week. There are "unfortunately only sporadic individual deliveries on the part of the Senate," the organisation reported, and thus "currently no sufficient supply of food and water."

"For up to 20 hours a day," the volunteers are battling "so that a humanitarian catastrophe does not take place, they arrange medical care, organize donations in kind, coordinate and distribute people throughout the city, drive people to accommodation, organise and arrange accommodation, arrange security and arrivals…," Moabit hilft e.V. wrote on their Facebook page .

The two main political leaders in the Senate, Franziska Giffey (SPD), the mayor of Berlin, and Katja Kipping, the senator for Integration, Labour and Social Affairs (Left Party), have rejected the criticism.

In unison, they emphasize the "huge challenge" (Giffey) in the face of the flow of refugees, the "historic responsibility" (Kipping) which the state of Berlin could not "handle alone," and make a few token criticisms about the responsibility of the federal government. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Kipping expressed her "infinite" gratitude to "the volunteers" and promised that "we will gradually assume more responsibility for the situation at the central station."

On the regional news programme on rbb last Sunday, Giffey reacted extremely irritably when the presenter referred to the loud criticism of the Senate in recent days and asked why there had been hardly any state representatives at the central station. Giffey replied, visibly struggling: "So you know, I find this question, frankly, embarrassing!"

The ruling class has a problem. It exploits the suffering of the refugees when it comes to advancing its own rearmament and war plans against Russia. At the same time, it has become clear after just a few days that they are hardly treating refugees from Ukraine any better than the hundreds of thousands who fled from the Middle East to Germany during the 2015 refugee crisis.

The nervousness of the ruling parties also stems from the enormous deterioration of the social and political situation in the entire country and, in particular, in the capital, which has a population of more than 3.6 million.

The impoverishment of large parts of the population, caused by decades of austerity, property speculation, an extreme lack of affordable housing and surging rent hikes, has been exacerbated by the ruling class's pandemic policy.

Against the housing shortage, the majority of the population voted in a referendum to expropriate housing companies, which the government coalition rejected. The government is now faced with the problem of housing war refugees. This will further

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exacerbate the serious housing problem faced by the working population as a whole.

In its second term in office, the coalition has not managed to alleviate the housing shortage or end homelessness nor has it been able to move the already stranded refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, the Middle East and parts of Africa from residential containers and refugee shelters to decent apartments.

Over half of the refugees in the state-run accommodation—some have lived there since 2015—have official residence status and are therefore actually entitled to their own apartments.

At the end of last year, 98 percent of the State Office for Refugees' accommodations were already occupied, which is why closed container homes had to be used again and temporary homes at the Tempelhofer airfield and a container village in Pankow had to be reopened.

Although the refugees from Ukraine are welcomed by the war-mongering parties for political reasons, they are resorting to hostels, churches, vacant buildings and five new temporary homes to house them. Sports halls have not yet been occupied as in 2015. However, the established practice of mass housing with not even a minimum of privacy and inadequate sanitary facilities has already been reactivated.

On Friday, 360 refugees were accommodated in the Berlin Exhibition Hall. Hundreds of sleeping places are being set up in the old Tegel airport. More than 400 field beds were set up as emergency quarters in Terminal 5 of the old Schönefeld airport building.

While the Berlin Senate was discussing appealing for help from the military, Giffey firmly rejected the proclamation of a state of emergency, which was called for by district offices due to overwhelming demand for their services.

This would allow, for example, accommodations to be requisitioned for the refugees. In addition, it would be easier to involve employees and volunteers from administration and companies in support and to procure "necessary materials, such as tents, beds and mobile toilets" despite "expenditure restrictions under the current provisional budget planning," as the *Tagesspiegel* put it.

In contrast to the obvious unwillingness of the Senate to take care of the desperate and traumatized people, Berliners have taken in many refugees in despite their own mostly very cramped living conditions. The *Tagesspiegel* referred to a "hard to comprehend mass of people" staying in private homes.

The hypocrisy and racism of the state government was crowned with the evacuation of the temporary homes where refugees were living in Berlin-Reinickendorf, in order to create space for the newcomers from Ukraine.

Last week Tareq A. of the Berlin Refugee Council announced on Twitter that the families, some with school-age children, had to leave their accommodations within 24 hours and move to an alternative location far away. The State Office for Refugees was not interested in the fact that the families were taken out of their homes and the children were removed from their classes. These people are obviously "second-class refugees!"

The forced evacuation of refugees met with sharp criticism and horror on social media. "This is all incredible! How can that be, @katjakipping? I don't know at all how anyone can reach such a decision…," declared one poster. Another commented, "You probably could only go this far if there are good refugees who are wanted and those you can't be bothered to take care of."

On the Facebook page of Social Senator Kipping, Halina S. sharply denounced the Left Party's "humanitarian aid" and explained: "As always, the commitment of the government always comes at the expense of the weakest. This is nothing less than an absolute scandal…"

The forced evacuation of the refugees was "a completely ill-considered and absolutely retraumatising move that is both senseless and thoughtless. The people who will bear the emotional costs is clear: the volunteers, the refugees, the psychologists, the doctors, who have worked with people for years to stabilize them; but certainly no one who stands on the podium in the Berlin Senate and makes speeches. I am absolutely outraged how your actions are damaging people most severely and how years of work are being destroyed. But that's nothing new from the Senate."

In fact, the refugee policy of the Berlin Senate is inhumane and corresponds at its core to the line of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The Berlin Council of Refugees pointed out at the beginning of the month that the notorious deportations under the Interior Senator Andreas Geisel (SPD) have continued under his successor Iris Spranger (SPD).

From January 2021 to January 2022, 1,126 people were deported by the Berlin Ministry of the Interior, 645 of whom were arrested by the police between midnight and 6:00 a.m. In addition, 141 Roma were deported to Moldova, the "poor house of Europe," in December 2021 and January 2022, although deportations in winter for humanitarian reasons are supposed to be avoided.

The deeply humane solidarity with refugees within the population stands in stark contrast to the deadly "fortress Europe" policy supported by all parties represented in parliament. The hypocritical and media-hyped policy towards the refugees from Ukraine cannot conceal this fact.

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