

Dilapidated dormitory complex in Munich highlights drastic situation facing students

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The number of students facing the financial abyss continues to grow. A report by the charity Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband (Parity Welfare Association) from May this year makes clear that students have been fobbed off with meagre handouts by politicians for years.

According to the revealing study, about 30 percent of students were affected by poverty in 2019. The number of BAföG (needs-based grants) recipients fell from 18.4 percent in 2010 to 11.3 percent in 2020, as state support was completely inadequately adapted to the living conditions of students.

The poverty rate among students is thus almost twice as high as in the population as a whole, at 16.8 percent.

The study does not take into account the drastic effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Many student part-time jobs have disappeared since the start of the pandemic, further exacerbating financial hardship. As a result, students are dropping out more frequently and incurring more debt.

The already volatile situation is also becoming increasingly acute for students because of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

Inflation in Germany was close to 8 percent in August, and the energy crisis is taking on ever harsher forms. At the same time, rents are rising relentlessly, and dorm space is being knowingly squeezed, as evidenced by a dispute over the redevelopment of Student City in Munich.

Rents for student housing have risen sharply in more than 75 percent of German cities over the past 12 months. Potsdam, Bremen and Giessen have seen the biggest increase, at 16 percent.

According to real estate portal immowelt, rents for student apartments in Munich are by far the most expensive. For a dwelling measuring 40 square metres, a student must dig deep to pay the €840 monthly rent. A year ago, it was €760.

The student services provider Studierendenwerk Munich assumes that utility costs will increase by 30 to 40 percent for the 2021/2022 billing year “due to the drastic increase in energy costs.” In the next billing year, students face a further increase in utility costs of 40 to 50 percent. For many, this is simply unaffordable.

In other university cities, the situation is similarly catastrophic. According to the Studierendenwerk Darmstadt,

utility costs have risen by 17 percent since July, while the Studentenwerk Gießen is talking about 16 percent. The Studierendenwerk Berlin is increasing rents by €60 per month to an average of €329 from January 1, 2023—a rise of almost 25 percent.

But that is not all: According to the Energy Management Office of the State of Berlin, those in 9,189 student places of residence in Berlin will face an explosion in energy prices of around 200 percent next year. Compared to August 2021 alone, energy prices have already risen by 35.6 percent.

In July, the BAföG reform raised the maximum support grant for students by just 5.75 percent to €427. The rent subsidy was increased by a paltry €35 to €360. Measured against inflation, students have even less money than before at their disposal.

Neither the one-time subsidy of €230 for BAföG recipients, nor the one-time payment for students of €200 specified in the government’s third “relief package,” will defuse the disastrous situation. In particular, the relief package fades into insignificance compared to the extreme redistribution from those at the bottom to those at the top that the government and corporations are currently organizing.

The situation in university cities is further exacerbated by the lack of student accommodation. According to the Studentenwerk Munich annual report for 2021, 14,000 students applied for a place in a student residence, but only slightly more than 4,000 were able to sign a lease. As of December 2021, more than 13,000 students were on the waiting list, forcing them to wait up to five semesters for a place.

In total, the Studentenwerk Munich could theoretically provide 11,242 rooms and apartments in Munich and the surrounding area. But available dorm space dropped for both 2019 and 2020 due to vacancies.

A dispute over the redevelopment of Student City, Germany’s largest dormitory complex in northern Munich, sheds light on the drastic situation. It is representative of the failure of the Bavarian state government and Studentenwerk Munich.

At present, considerable parts of Student City stand empty. Almost 2,500 students could live there, but currently there are just 1,000 residents. Three of four high-rise buildings are so dilapidated that they are no longer habitable.

Studentenwerk Munich only took over the building complex in 2015 from the charity that had run the facility previously. The oldest buildings are already over 50 years old. So far, only three of a total of 14 atrium buildings have been completely renovated between 2016 and 2019.

A terrible fire in the “Red House” in February 2021 revealed just how dire is the state of Student City. A 23-year-old student died of severe smoke inhalation, and a 28-year-old man was seriously injured; both died trying to save themselves via the heavily smoke-filled stairwell of the six-story building.

According to the fire investigators of the Munich police headquarters and the State Office of Criminal Investigation, the cause of the fire was a technical defect in the building’s basement sauna, which was closed at the time due to the pandemic. The investigation is still ongoing and the acting managing director of Studentenwerk, Ursula Wurzer-Faßnacht, is keeping quiet about the matter.

Further expert reports revealed extensive fire protection deficits in Student City, as a result of which two more residential complexes had to be vacated in the course of last year.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), an expert had pointed out “serious deficiencies” in fire protection to the Studentenwerk months before the fire. The Studentenwerk was therefore aware of the condition of the complex. The deficiencies were subsequently remedied in a makeshift manner so that the building could continue to be used for years to come without the necessary investments—regardless of the continuing danger to the lives of the residents.

Parts of Student City escaped a compulsory clearance order at the beginning of 2021, because there were escape routes in the stairwells and therefore no “significant danger” could be determined. A private expert also considered the continued use of the “Red House” to be justifiable. There were also serious fire safety deficiencies in the “Orange House,” but it remained occupied for another eight months after the fire.

A spokesman for the Studentenwerk emphasized to the SZ newspaper that “the well-being” of the residents was “the top priority at all times.” No errors or omissions had occurred in the past, he said, as fire protection had been investigated “on an ongoing basis.” The additional measures taken after the fire, for example in the form of a fire watch, supposedly testified to an “unconditional priority” for safety. The cynicism of these statements can hardly be outdone.

According to auditing firm KPMG, another Studentenwerk apartment complex was certified as having “very poor” fire protection, meaning that further apartments cannot be rented to students.

Meanwhile, the Bavarian state government and Studentenwerk Munich are passing the buck between each other—a lesson in political unscrupulousness, played out on the backs of countless students.

On the one hand, there is the Studentenwerk, which,

according to its own statement, does not have the necessary capital to finance the redevelopment of Student City. It is demanding financial support of €24.5 million from the Bavarian state government.

The Christian Social Union (CSU), which rules in Bavaria, on the other hand, sees the Studentenwerk as responsible for the supposedly “unnecessary” vacancies in Student City. Last March, the state parliamentary science committee chairman, Robert Brannekämper (CSU), even went so far as to speak to the SZ about a hasty compulsory clearance of the high-rises in the north of Munich.

About two weeks ago, Bavarian Science Minister Markus Blume (CSU) also proposed raising rents for student dormitories. Students should therefore be made to pay for the redevelopment of the student city and other dormitory complexes themselves.

The despicable attitudes of those responsible surrounding the redevelopment of Student City are strongly reminiscent of June 2017, when 72 people died in London in the catastrophic Grenfell Tower high-rise fire due to the predictable consequences of employing the wrong form of external cladding as a cost-cutting measure. For the bourgeoisie, human life is more or less irrelevant.

While there is supposedly no money for education and housing, the German government decided in February to endow the armed forces with a special fund worth €100 billion. By comparison, federal spending on education and research has been cut from €20.82 billion (2021) to the current €20.39 billion. A paltry increase of €186,000 is planned for next year.

Moreover, heavy weaponry and tanks worth billions are being supplied to Ukraine, risking a third world war that could spell the end of humanity.

In July, Federal Minister of Construction Klara Geywitz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) announced a funding program for “Housing for the Young.” From next year until 2026, the construction of new housing for students and trainees is to be subsidized. As far as the financial volume of the funding program is concerned, Geywitz exulted that it would “be in the hundreds of millions.”

Such promises are not worth the paper they are written on, nor will they alleviate the drastic situation facing students and young people.

Many students are already asking themselves: would I rather have a roof over my head or something to eat? Many workers, families and pensioners can hardly cope with the skyrocketing prices for energy, food and rent. At the same time, a tiny wealthy elite lives in luxury.



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