

Thousands protest in Germany against crisis in education

Our reporters

25 September 2023

The call of the alliance “Schule muss anders” (“School must be different”), which includes 170 educational organisations and initiatives, brought out 15,000 to 20,000 participants nationwide (around 7,000 in Berlin, 2,000 in Munich and 3,000 in Cologne).

In the call for the education protest day “Bildungswende JETZT” (“Education change NOW”), the initiators address the federal and state governments as well as the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK), drawing on their online petition of the same name, which more than 70,000 people have signed.

With their four central demands, including at least €100 billion in “special funds for education” and “for a fairer, sustainable and inclusive education system that prepares for the future,” the alliance aims to counter one of the “most serious education crises since the founding of the Federal Republic.”

Nationwide, there is a shortage of hundreds of thousands of nursery places and 300,000 nursery educators in Germany. In the school sector, there will be a shortage of more than 160,000 teachers by 2035. According to the teachers’ association, a shortage of up to 40,000 teachers is expected for the coming school year alone.

“An enormous and widening shortage” of teachers and educators “meets an outdated, underfunded and segregated education system that is socially unjust,” the alliance states.

But the trade unionists and politicians who lead the alliance are themselves responsible for the misery in the education system that they loudly lament. They see the protests as nothing more than an opportunity to blow off steam and cover up their own right-wing and anti-education policies.

The alliance is led by the board members Philipp Dehne (teacher), spokesperson for education and culture for the Left Party group in the BVV (District Assembly) Berlin-Neukölln, and Ahmed Abed (lawyer), Berlin-Neukölln BVV Left Party group leader, as well as Jörg Tetzner, member of the district leadership the GEW education union in Berlin-Neukölln, and Annick Hartmann from the Parents’ Network.

Thus, the board is led by members of the very party that has been responsible for social and cultural decline in Berlin for almost 20 years, since the 2000s.

Together with their coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, and in close cooperation with the trade unions, they have turned Berlin into the “capital of poverty.” Drastic budget cuts in all social areas and billions of euros in subsidies and support for the corporations have caused child poverty, housing shortages and low-wage work to explode in Berlin. Children and their education are the main victims of this policy. Many schools are dilapidated and there is a glaring shortage of teachers, especially in the socially deprived areas.

Now, at federal level, more than a billion euros are to be cut from education budgets once again in order to implement new billion-euro gifts to big business and the largest rearmament spending since Hitler.

The demonstrations were therefore marked by sharp opposition. The enormous anger among parents, educators and teachers about the horrendous grievances in education was only expressed to a limited extent. Because the parties and trade unions had hardly mobilised for the protests, it was mainly people from their periphery who came to the demonstrations. Justifications for the policies of the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens and even expressions of support for rearmament were more common than average.

On the other hand, those who had come to the demonstrations more spontaneously, despite the weak publicity, expressed their anger at the policies of all parties, linked the demand for billions for education with a rejection of pro-war policies and saw themselves as part of the growing labour struggles around the world.

Isolde came to the demonstration in Stuttgart because she is very worried about the future of her grandchildren: “Education is going down the drain. I don’t know where it’s going to go.” From her point of view, the money was not only lacking in education, but “everywhere.” Inflation, rising rent and energy costs, ever worse working conditions and poor wages were hitting more and more workers and employees hard. Instead of adequate pay for the professionals in the nurseries and schools, the trade unions, which should actually represent the interests of their members, were ensuring one real wage cut after another, she said. That’s why Isolde also attacked the role of the trade unions: “They could bring so many people onto the streets, but they don’t do that. They are compliant with the

state.”

When approached by WSWs reporters, Christian (Stuttgart), who had not heard about the planned demonstration beforehand and only joined by chance, said, “Less and less money is going into education, although education is actually a basic right for everyone.”

The impact of the lack of funding for education, which also includes recreational and social care for children and young people, was obvious to Christian. “The problems are evident everywhere. Even the riots that happened here were a result of cuts in education and other social areas.”

Anka from the Steglitz District Centre, an independent youth welfare organisation that organises five day-care centres, supplementary support at primary schools and youth houses, points out at the Berlin demonstration that it would be urgent “that we have sufficient funding.”

The growing poverty in the city was clear, especially for youth welfare organisations, she said. With the help of “networks, support projects,” it was still possible to compensate for the material effects of poverty. “To compensate for poverty or to notice that children don’t have certain things, sometimes maybe they don’t get enough to eat, and you notice that they eat especially much in the institution—these are things that we still get,” says Anka. “But that children are accompanied, that children have contact persons, that they have the language, that they have time to develop, these things, you can’t compensate with money or with material things ... for that we need people who have time to actually deal with the children.”

In Berlin, several nurseries had lost their premises or had to close down completely in recent months because they could no longer pay the skyrocketing rents. That’s why Anka called for sufficient funding so that “the providers are able to pay the rents and ancillary costs, and that the staff are paid reasonably.”

A mother who took part in the demonstration with her four children explained that “schools urgently need more staff and better equipment. The buildings are dilapidated. So, it’s really difficult on all fronts.” Her children, who range in age from nine to 17, attended schools where “class sizes [are] insanely large, sometimes over 30 children in a class at secondary schools.” In addition, “a lot of lessons are cancelled ... because of illness, overworked staff. In after-school care, for example, we have a 50 percent sick rate at primary school right now.”

At primary schools, there was “the additional problem that nursery school teachers and also teachers are still not so well paid in some cases. Also, because many career changers [those from other professions taken on as teachers] are persuaded by school management to work first before they catch up on their real qualifications.”

Several participants stressed that “it’s not just burning at the schools hotspot” but “everywhere” and saw no political interest on the part of those in government to invest in children and young people or to engage at all.

Contrary to the pro-government positions of the initiators of the protest, many ordinary participants rejected the official pro-war policy. Isolde, for example, when asked about this, replied: “They bomb everything in Ukraine and then we don’t have the money.” Christian was also very opposed to the rearmament of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces): “That leads to chain reactions. If some arm, all the others arm as well. Then there has to be a big bang at some point.”

Furthermore, Christian was convinced that savings were also being made in education so that people “don’t really know” about certain historical contexts, such as the reason for the current Ukraine war. “The Ukraine war did not have to take place. It was brought about by us. If you look at the history of the Western world, it’s one of power mongering. When I was a child, I was here on Schlossplatz at a demonstration against the war in Iraq. Since I’ve been in the world, wars have been waged from here [Germany], for example in Yugoslavia and Kosovo.”

With their self-made large banner “100 billion for education—not for war!” three other participants also gave vent to their disapproval. When asked about the banner, one of them, who works as an educator at a school, explained: “We have an austerity budget in Berlin now, it’s not by chance. The money just goes to war—destroys the schools here and there!” “Without peace, everything is nothing, so ceasefire and stop the war!”

At the demonstrations in Cologne, Stuttgart and Berlin, Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) members discussed a socialist perspective against war and cuts and collected dozens of signatures for the party to participate in the European elections. Angela Niklaus, who is running for the SGP in the European elections, emphasised the close link between the pro-war policies and social attacks, stating:

“The protests for a good education for all must be directed against all the establishment parties and the trade unions that support them. Protesters must see themselves as part of the growing class struggles in Europe and around the world, in which workers are resisting the horrendous cuts in real wages and pro-war policies. This requires a socialist perspective against capitalism and war.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact