

Defend Berlin's Oyoun cultural centre! No to censorship of war opponents!

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
24 November 2023

On Monday, at a meeting of the House of Representatives' (State Legislature) Culture Committee, Berlin's state Minister for Culture Joe Chialo (Christian Democrat) announced that he would stop funding the renowned Oyoun cultural centre at the end of the year, contrary to existing promises, and rent the state-owned property to someone else. The reason given by the Senate (State Executive) for this unlawful action was that events critical of the Israeli war against Gaza were taking place in the centre.

The *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) strongly condemns this far-reaching attack on freedom of art and expression and calls on readers around the world to send protest emails to the Senator for Culture (joe.chialo@kultur.berlin.de, copy to sgp@gleichheit.de) and to sign Oyoun's online petition .

Oyoun describes itself as a "place of the intersectional art and culture scene, which primarily centres on queer*feminist, migrant and decolonial perspectives and has already received several international awards for its work". It employs 32 people and organises around 600 events with 82,000 visitors every year.

At the beginning of the month, the Senate administration had asked the centre to cancel an event with "Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East" because it was too "politically charged". Prior to this, the Green Party parliamentary group in the Berlin state House of Representatives published a statement in which it called for all funding to be cut because Oyoun had behaved in an "antisemitic" manner by inviting the Jewish group.

The cultural centre, whose 10-member advisory board itself includes three Jewish people, rejected this shameless slander and did not bow to pressure from the Senate. In a statement, it criticised the increasing control of its work by the Senate and the associated attack on artistic freedom

and declared: "We unconditionally condemn all forms of antisemitism, just as we fight all other forms of racism and discrimination, including anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism."

On 6 November, at the request of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Chialo then declared at a meeting of the Culture Committee that he was examining the cancellation of funding in order to implement the "state concept for the prevention of anti-Semitism". The Oyoun team refused to be intimidated and published an open letter, which has been signed by over 11,000 people. It also offered premises for further events opposing Israel's actions, including one organised by the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* on 14 November entitled "Stop the massacre in Gaza".

At the meeting on Monday, Chialo then announced that he would cease payments to Oyoun by the end of the year and put the use of the property out to tender again. This was explicitly and unreservedly supported by the representatives of all the parties in the House of Representatives.

In this context, Social Democratic Party (SPD) representative Reinhard Naumann quoted from "A call to the working class and youth" issued by the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* to stop the "imperialist-Zionist genocide in Gaza". The SGP had distributed this as a leaflet and included an advertisement for the event at Oyoun.

The statement calls on workers around the world to strike and protest against the genocide in Gaza. It declares, "We call for the development of protests and demonstrations within Israel itself. Its soldiers, many of whom are reservists, should defy—as is required under international law—the criminal orders of the Netanyahu regime and the military general staff."

Naumann called this international perspective against the war "monstrous" and put it on a par with the

Holocaust, the worst crime in human history! If “Never again is now”* was to make any sense, “then we must not ignore it in silence”, said the Social Democrat. [*A reference to the expression *Nie Wieder Faschismus*, Never again fascism.]

Members of the Trotskyist movement were exterminated in concentration camps under the Nazis as part of the “Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy” because they advocated this perspective of international socialism. To associate them in any way with the crimes of German imperialism is a groundless falsification of history, which is intended both to rehabilitate fascism and to discredit socialist politics.

It is therefore not surprising that Naumann was immediately supported by AfD deputy Robert Eschricht, who identified a “network of antisemitism” in Oyoun and also supported the cancellation of its lease with the words: “Never again is now.” Left Party deputy Manuela Schmidt was also pleased with the senator’s “very clear positioning” and fully supported the action.

It is obvious that the censorship of Jewish Voice for Peace and socialist arguments in favour of the joint struggle of Palestinian and Israeli workers against war has nothing to do with the fight against antisemitism. On the contrary, for the Senate administration, it is a matter of suppressing any criticism of its support for the massacre in Gaza, its agitation against refugees and its abolition of democratic rights. It is this state repression and support for the genocide in Gaza that recalls to the worst traditions of the Nazis, and not Jewish and socialist opposition to war!

The action against Oyoun has far-reaching consequences. From now on, any organisation that criticises the government’s policy must fear losing any basis for work.

The Berlin Senate will use any means necessary to enforce this blanket censorship of critical voices. Oyoun was actually promised four years of funding in 2021 until the end of 2025. An earlier termination, if it is permitted at all, would have to be appropriate and justified.

However, the Senate administration has so far refused to provide any justification at all and brazenly claims that there was never a binding commitment. With this unlawful approach, the Senate wants to impose its dictates on the entire art world. Nobody should be able to feel safe.

The purges in the art and culture world are already well advanced. The Documenta art exhibition in Kassel is to be cut off because of unsustainable accusations of

antisemitism against its curators, and the “Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie” (“Contemporary Photography Biennale”) was cancelled altogether because of supposedly “antisemitic” posts by curator Shahidul Alam. Countless artists and cultural workers have been banned from performing because they have thematised the genocide in Gaza or even just had the wrong ancestry.

This imposed conformity of cultural life is part of a tremendous repression against dissenters. Anyone who criticises the government’s pro-war policy must expect arbitrary arrests, house searches and secret service surveillance. Demonstrations against the massacre in Gaza are banned by the dozens, the demand for equal rights for Palestinians is criminalised, and Muslims are placed under general suspicion.

These sweeping attacks on democratic rights are not an expression of the strength of the ruling class but of its weakness. This pro-war policy, which goes hand in hand with unprecedented social attacks and wage cuts, is overwhelmingly opposed.

According to a recent survey by the Allensbach Institute, a clear majority in Germany reject Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip—despite the deafening propaganda across the media. Only 8 percent support the supply of weapons to Israel by the German government. Millions of people around the world are taking to the streets against the genocide.

The only way to beat back the attack on Oyoun and defend the freedom of art is to mobilise this very opposition. Workers must now take sides and protest against the abolition of basic democratic rights in order to defend their own rights and stop the war. We therefore once again call on all readers to send protest emails to the Senator for Culture (joe.chialo@kultur.berlin.de, copy to sgp@gleichheit.de) and to sign Oyoun’s online petition .



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