Berlin: Humboldt University Student Parliament rejects pro-Israel motion proposed by Social Democrats

Humboldt University IYSSE Group
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Last week, the Student Parliament (StuPa) of Humboldt University (HU) in Berlin rejected by a large majority a motion aimed at defending Israel's genocide in the Gaza Strip and suppressing criticism of it. Many visitors attended the public meeting and rejected the war propaganda in harsh terms.

The Juso university group—the student arm of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—had attempted to glorify the Netanyahu government's war policy as a "defence" and slander protest against it as "antisemitic." The motion went so far as to misuse the memory of the Holocaust to justify the war policy.

Although the initiative was also supported by the openly right-wing parliamentary groups in the StuPa and several student representatives attempted to stifle the debate bureaucratically, the motion failed. Instead, the StuPa adopted a motion condemning antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism and calling for solidarity with all students affected by the war.

In the run-up to the StuPa meeting, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) university group called for the motion to be rejected and conducted an intensive campaign among students. The IYSSE had already publicly condemned the Jusos' motion at the previous StuPa meeting and called for an end to the genocide. Several dozen visitors, including Muslim and Palestinian students, as well as members of the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Student Collective Berlin, responded to the IYSSE's call on Tuesday. The conference hall was fuller than it had been for years.

In her opening plea in favour of the motion, Juso spokesperson Thekla M. left no doubt as to the right-wing agenda behind the motion. She explicitly condemned an open letter from students and staff at Berlin universities and several student protests criticising the university administrations' support for Israel and calling for a stop to the killing.

According to the Juso spokesperson, such protests meant that "Jewish students no longer feel safe at university." In reality, students of Jewish origin, together with their fellow students worldwide, are taking part in the protests *en masse* and playing a prominent role in them.

Gregor Kahl, IYSSE representative to the StuPa, unequivocally rejected these lies and the Juso parliamentary group's motion in his counter-speech. The "annihilation and expulsion of two million Palestinians," said Kahl, had nothing to do with self-defence, but was tantamount to genocide. With its support for this policy, the German government "does not have the protection of Jewish life in mind", but rather wanted to "expand its geopolitical influence in the entire region."

According to Kahl, it was "not the millions of people who are fighting for the freedom of the Palestinians worldwide" who were expressing antisemitism, "but the German ruling class, which abuses the memory of the Holocaust to legitimise new crimes and at the same time runs a murderous and racist campaign against Muslims and refugees." Kahl concluded by calling on all the StuPa representatives to support the IYSSE motion condemning the genocide in Gaza and highlighting the central role played by Humboldt University in ideologically justifying Germany's pro-war policy.

As a result, numerous visitors came forward to condemn the massacre in Gaza and reject the Jusos' motion. Many supported the IYSSE's criticism and emphasised other critical aspects. In the meantime, around 20 people were on the list of speakers.

One HU student of Palestinian origin castigated the Juso motion as "disgraceful" and "full of hypocrisy, ignorance and sheer bigotry." He explained: "Basically, we have to decide today, whether we agree or not, that the Palestinians deserve to be considered human beings.

"It is ironic that once again the ruling party's youth organisation is being used as a tool to lead attacks and smear campaigns against an oppressed minority that is persecuted at every turn, removed from their jobs, ostracised and even deported. This persecution, by the way, extends to anti-Zionist Jews as well."

"I will say what many are afraid to say," he concluded. "It is not 'complicated.' Israel is a state, not a people, and it is a racist, colonial, ethno-religious apartheid state. Israel is a terrorist organisation."

Several speakers criticised the motion from a Jewish perspective, among others. Benny, for example, whose relatives, as Jews, had to flee Eastern Europe, declared:

> Please stop equating Judaism with Israel. Jews have legitimate criticism of the state of Israel, including in Israel itself. I find it ridiculous to use this hammer of antisemitism to destroy any criticism of Israel. When I hear the way some people talk here, I get the feeling that some people are not really interested in the topic. I would ask you to perhaps read a few books. If the whole thing starts for you on 7 October, then that just shows how ignorant you are.

Benny then denounced the "whole discussion as it is being conducted in the media and in public." He concluded: "I ask you all to think about how it feels for your Muslim fellow citizens—for all the people around you who have fled from different countries—when their lives are not perceived as human lives and not mentioned, for example in the Jusos' motion."

Another student rejected the use of the term "historical responsibility" in the Juso motion as "shameful":

> My grandmother remembered what the Germans did. Many of us

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> have remembered. I think the historical responsibility is to stand up for human rights. Even if that means not siding with your state. Instead, you stand with the Jewish Israelis, with the Jewish-Arab Israelis, with the Palestinians, and condemn the ongoing genocide.
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> This is a very fundamental statement. I think we are voting today on the notion of solidarity with both Jewish students and Palestinian students. The motion put forward by the SPD bourgeoisie is clearly one-sided. Anyone who has read it can see that. We have well over 13,000 dead. Let's condemn Israel and the genocide. Otherwise, history will hold a tribunal.

Alban, whose grandfather had fought against the Nazis in Yugoslavia, referred to the criticism of international human rights organisations and denounced the fact that the memory of the Holocaust was being misused to justify new crimes:

> I am very disturbed that in Germany—where six million Jewish people were killed and the Holocaust was committed—we turn a blind eye to the fact that the Palestinian people are being slaughtered and massacred. That is disgusting and despicable. I hope that the German people have learnt the lesson of history and the Holocaust: That human rights must be valid for all people. For this reason, I would like to call for all victims of wars and crimes to be recognised and for the genocide in Gaza to end.

Thao criticised the anti-democratic actions against Palestinian organisations and the restriction of freedom of expression at universities:

> People and institutions that show solidarity with Palestinian people are accused of supporting Hamas. They are associated with antisemitism without any differentiated judgement. They are fired or their funding is withdrawn. This also affects institutions that have been actively addressing racism and anti-Semitism in a differentiated way for years and are currently trying to do so.

Juliette explained that the Juso motion was based on a definition of antisemitism that is scientifically untenable and "is criticised and questioned from many perspectives." She continued: "As we have already seen in some contributions, this leads to a conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism. Justified criticism of Israel is dismissed and delegitimised as antisemitic, and so academic freedom and freedom of speech are restricted.

"This is particularly problematic in an academic context, because academic freedom should actually allow us to have a space in which precisely these things can be discussed on an academic level."

In his contribution, Tobias noted that it was not the opponents of the massacre in Gaza who are part of the antisemitic tradition of the German elites, but the supporters of the Juso motion. This identified Jewish people worldwide with the genocidal crimes of the Israeli government:

> My grandpa was in a concentration camp and my grandma was deported to Germany for forced labour. The descendants of those who committed these crimes now want to advocate another genocide in the name of these victims. They are doing this because they are just like their grandparents.
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> Pretending that all Jews are criminals and are in favour of genocide is antisemitism. Pretending that Israel speaks for all Jews is antisemitism. Because everyone sees that crimes are being committed against children and the civilian population, that Israel is bombing hospitals and schools.

The representatives of the German government in particular embodied "the same as their grandparents," said Tobias. "This state, which committed the crimes back then, is still doing it today. And it is an advocate of antisemitism. Yes, we must fight antisemitism. Let's start with these people."

Throughout the course of the debate, representatives from other student groups repeatedly attempted to stifle criticism of the Juso motion using antidemocratic arguments to curtail the debate bureaucratically. While the IYSSE group in every case objected and voted against, several of these motions found a majority among the representatives.

For example, a member of the SDS (Left Party university group) proposed a motion that each speaker should only be allowed to speak once. A little later, the RCDS (Christian Democrat group) moved that speaking time be limited to two minutes per speaker. The Juso group itself tried to push through a motion to halt the debate immediately when it became clear that the next six speakers on the list would be opponents of their motion.

One HU graduate, who was specifically attacked in the Juso motion, was even to be denied the right to comment on the accusations against his group. Georg, who now works as a researcher at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, had the microphone cut off by the chair on the grounds that he was no longer a student.

When he explained to the meeting, without a microphone, that a protest criticised by the Jusos in 2018 had nothing to do with antisemitism, the chair banned him from the building and organised a 20-minute pause to the debate in order to call in security guards to supervise the rest of the session.

Georg had tried to clarify that the protest was directed against a right-wing politician and Knesset (Israeli parliament) member who had supported the Gaza war in 2014. The critic slandered by the Jusos as "antisemitic" was herself a Jewish Israeli, a peace activist and conscientious objector.

Because only student representatives—but not visitors—had the right to vote, the IYSSE motion was rejected against the votes of the IYSSE group and under protest from several participants. Instead, a majority of representatives adopted a motion that called for solidarity for "all students and researchers affected by the escalation of violence," but did not criticise Israel's or Germany's war policy.

The IYSSE is calling for further protests against the massacre in Gaza. Contact us to develop the movement and reject the intimidation and censorship at the universities!

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