

Defend the right to free artistic expression! Oppose the Berlin Senate's censorship clause!

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On Monday, the Culture Committee of the Berlin Senate agreed on the introduction of a clause that effectively abolishes artistic freedom and represents a major step towards the type of cultural conformism imposed by the Nazis. Under the pretext of combating “extremism,” “terrorism,” “discrimination” and “antisemitism,” anyone who criticises Germany’s war policy or Israeli crimes is to be silenced. Cultural workers are to be placed under general suspicion.

In the future, funding decisions from the Senate Committee for Culture will contain a so-called “anti-discrimination clause,” which obliges the recipients of funding to “take all necessary steps to ensure that the state funding does not benefit any organisations classified as extremist and/or terrorist.” The basis for this measure is the “terror list” drawn up by the European Union (EU) and the “constitution protection reports” of the German domestic intelligence service, explained Culture Senator Joe Chialo (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

In particular, the clause is directed against any content alleged to be “antisemitic” according to the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Chialo claimed the aim was to further “sensitize” institutions and cultural professionals by “anchoring the definition into the funding guidelines” along with an “obligatory self-declaration for applicants.” In fact, the IHRA’s definition lacks any scientific credibility and has been criticised by hundreds of academics and historians around the world.

Hundreds of demonstrators protested against the introduction of the clause in front of the Berlin Senate on Monday. An open letter from creative artists, which gathered over 4,000 signatures in just a few days, warned: “The withdrawal of financial support and public platforms is currently being used as a means of pressure to exclude from public discourse those critical of the policies of the Israeli government and the war in Gaza. The planned clause will make it easier for the administration and politicians to use this means of pressure and restrict the space for necessary

discourse.”

Gulya, who took part in the demonstration with two friends, told the WSWS: “I am an artist and rely on public funding. I am appalled that people are trying to silence us when we stand up for something so important. I fear Germany is moving in a far right direction and I’m angry with the German left. Media outlets like the *taz* newspaper are attacking us and supporting Israel. They are all part of the problem.”

When Chialo took the microphone at the rally in order to condemn the protesters and defend his censorship measure, he was met with a chorus of booing, forcing him to quickly quit the podium and hurry into the Senate building.

During the subsequent meeting of the Berlin Culture Committee, representatives of all the political parties represented in the Senate expressed their full support for Chialo’s frontal attack on culture. Melanie Kühnemann-Grunow (Social Democratic Party, SPD) began by agreeing with the CDU-led initiative and bluntly threatened cultural workers: “We have noticed a resounding silence in the arts and culture sector after 7 October.” She then called for the Senate’s intervention to also be “reflected in artistic output.” There could no more blatant way to formulate the demand for thoroughly conformist art and culture!

Daniel Wesener (Greens) boasted that the city’s previous coalition of the SPD, Left Party and Greens had already implemented key elements of Chialo’s initiative: “The clause is already in force. The self-declaration is already part of funding applications.” However, he added, he had sent Chialo a multi-page catalogue of questions “on implementation” in order to help the Senator avoid “coming into conflict with constitutional issues.”

Martin Trefzer from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) also thanked Chialo for his initiative. Trefzer praised the Green parliamentary group’s list of questions and summarized the committee’s position: “We must react to the Israel-related antisemitism that we experienced after 7 October.” The AfD and the Greens agreed that it was now a matter of “making the clause legally tight.”

Elke Breitenbach (Left Party) merely criticised the enactment, but not the content of the clause. It should have been implemented in consultation with the heads of cultural institutions and churches, who had all taken up the censorship and war propaganda of the German government in past weeks. “We would have done it differently,” explained Breitenbach meekly.

In reality, Chialo’s initiative ties in seamlessly with the policies of the Left Party and its former coalition partners. The “Berlin State Concept for the Prevention of Antisemitism,” which the former SPD-Left Party-Green Senate adopted in 2019, states: “The working definition of antisemitism of the International Alliance for Holocaust Remembrance, as expanded by the federal government, forms the basis of Berlin’s administrative action to deal with antisemitism.”

Re-interpreting the “fight against antisemitism” as a weapon against critics of Israel’s murderous policies is a prime example of a political process described by WSWS International Editorial Board chairman David North as a “semantic inversion” in his lecture at Humboldt University on December 14, 2023. Under the leadership of far-right forces, commemoration of the Holocaust is now being misused to legitimise new crimes and criminalize opponents of war - especially socialists and Jewish-Israeli opposition activists. The association of the Jewish population with the crimes of the Israeli government carried out in this manner is itself deeply antisemitic in character.

What is at stake is nothing less than the destruction of artistic freedom. The wording of the clause implies that applicants may not invite, employ or allow people to speak whose perspectives do not coincide with the interests of the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Office or the European Commission. Anyone who organises anti-war protests, publishes works of criticism or provides a stage for opponents of war must reckon with the withdrawal of the funding upon which independent art is so dependent. The desired consequence is state censorship and preemptory self-censorship.

This is most clearly demonstrated by the Berlin Senate’s attempts to shut down the Oyoun cultural Centre in Neukölln after meetings were held there by the “Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East” and the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) opposing the massacre in Gaza. With the support of all parties, the Senate decided at the end of November to stop funding the renowned cultural centre, contrary to existing promises, and to rent the property to someone else. Since then, several employees of the migrant centre have been threatened with deportation.

In a widely circulated statement, the SGP warned of the far-reaching implications of the Senate’s action against the

Oyoun cultural centre: “Anyone who criticises the government’s war policy must expect arbitrary arrests, house searches and secret service surveillance. Demonstrations against the massacre in Gaza are being banned by the dozen, the demand for equal rights for Palestinians is being criminalized and Muslims are being placed under general suspicion.”

The working class is confronted with a phalanx of the entire ruling class determined to silence all those who oppose the government’s war policy. Culture Senator Chialo referred on Wednesday to a similar clause that has already been passed by the state of Schleswig-Holstein and predicted threateningly: “All federal states and the federal government will follow suit.” At a closed meeting last weekend, Bavaria’s ruling, deeply conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) called for critics of Israel to be punished with “at least six months in prison” for “antisemitism” and for foreign citizens who take part in a “hostile, antisemitic crowd” to be deported.

“The purges in the art and cultural world are already well underway,” the SGP statement goes on to warn. “Any institution that criticises the government’s policy must now fear losing any basis for its work.”

This development cannot be tolerated. We call on all artists, students and workers to protest against the introduction of the censorship clause and to take part in the strike against the genocide in the Gaza Strip to be held on January 14. The growing social struggles of the working class must be linked to the immense opposition to the war - and requires an international and socialist orientation and perspective. Sign up today to support the participation in the European elections of the SGP, which is fighting for precisely this perspective and defending artistic freedom on this basis.



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