Police besiege Berlin's Free University and attack peaceful pro-Palestinian protest camp

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On Tuesday, Berlin's Free University (FU) was put under siege. In response to a peaceful pro-Palestinian protest camp, the Berlin police, in cooperation with the university administration, deployed a large contingent of officers, halted university operations, cleared the entire university building and used brutal methods to make numerous arrests.

The camp was set up by students from the Student Coalition Berlin in the theatre courtyard of the FU Berlin at around 10 a.m.

In a statement, the participants declared they were organising the camp "in solidarity with the Palestinian people." Their demands included a stop to the genocide in Gaza, a halt to arms exports, the defence of academic freedom and the cancellation of military research projects at the university. They combined these demands with an appeal to their "fellow students, faculty members and academic partners" to join this call.

The university management reacted immediately by calling the police and demanding the evacuation of the camp on the grounds of their domiciliary rights. The police arrived with a large contingent of 200 officers for a courtyard measuring less than 400 square metres in size and had completely surrounded the camp by noon.

Within a short space of time, around 200 students joined the 20 or so encircled students and protested in the theatre courtyard outside the camp. The police and university management reacted forcefully: the canteen and libraries in the building were closed immediately and all courses there were cancelled for the day. Police officers were positioned on the roof to film the demonstrators.

When the police had driven the students out of the inner courtyard, the students gathered again in the building and expressed their solidarity with those trapped in the camp. They knocked on windows and held up signs reading "You are not alone" and "We are many." The police also took brutal action against them: On several occasions, they stormed the corridor where the students had gathered to drag individual participants from the crowd into the courtyard, throw them to the ground and take them away. They also used pepper spray and irritant gas.

Over a period of several hours, the police used painful grips to remove the encircled students. They then drove the protesters out of the university building and a large contingent of officers patrolled the corridors in order to eject all the students. However, students were not intimidated and once again formed a spontaneous demonstration of several hundred participants in front of the university building. This demonstration continued to the forecourt of the Dahlem Dorf underground station and was again attacked several times by the police.

A police spokesperson explained afterwards how those arrested were dealt with: "We establish their identity and then initiate proceedings for trespassing, suspected incitement to hatred and violation of the Freedom of Assembly Act. The demonstration had not been authorised."

If such events had taken place in a country like Russia, China or Iran, there would be a massive campaign in the Western media about the dictatorial behaviour of these regimes. However, the FU university management, which has filed criminal charges against the students, and the Berlin state government proudly defended their actions.

FU President Günter Ziegler declared that an occupation of the FU campus was "unacceptable." He was "available for an academic dialogue—but not in this

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way.” Berlin’s mayor Kai Wegner (Christian Democrat, CDU) said he was very grateful to the university for its actions. The “consistent approach” was “absolutely right.”

After a meeting between the Senate (Berlin state executive) and the leadership of the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO), he declared that he “does not want a situation in Berlin like the one that exists at universities in America.”

Berlin’s Senator (state minister) for Science Ina Czyborra (Social Democrat, SPD) also agreed with him and thanked the FU management for their quick and decisive action. A decision on further measures such as bans or criminal charges would be up to the university, she said, which was in intensive dialogue with the university management.

Adrian Grasse, research policy spokesperson for the CDU state parliamentary group in Berlin, expressed his concern about the number of people involved in such actions. In this context, he believed it was “right that we react politically to these developments by reintroducing the [university] regulatory law.”

Theo, who was present at the demonstrations and observed the actions of the police in the corridor in particular, saw “really pointless arrests where people were just shouting, and perhaps shouting with a little more anger than others.” The police then “ran up to them for no reason” and “grabbed them and pulled them out.”

He sharply criticised the actions of the police and the university management: “I find it extreme that the police deployed so quickly for what I saw was a totally peaceful demonstration. The university in particular should be a place for peaceful protest.”

For Theo, the increase in campus occupations internationally shows that the previous forms of protest have had no effect: “I think it’s extreme that people are practically forced to organise these kinds of camps as a sign that simple demonstrations are apparently not going to work.”

When WSWS reporters emphasised that it was necessary for students to turn to the working class, Theo agreed: “It will never work if only the students, only the academics demonstrate.” Workers had already shown that they have the potential to really change things, for example when they refuse to produce weapons, he said. “That is the best way for a protest to take place, because such protests make a difference, regardless of the media attention. If the weapons are not produced, they cannot be shipped. You can’t send a better signal than that.”

Melda also condemned the arbitrary actions of the police: “Individual students were specifically dragged out without justification. The police just came in, looked into the crowd and then simply dragged some people out with them, and other students were not allowed out.”

For Melda, the actions of the police exposed the hypocrisy of democracy in Germany. “Germany is always very loud; when other countries do that they are immediately labelled as dictatorships. The media wouldn’t stop talking about it.”

However, despite the constant propaganda and hostility in the media, the demonstrations showed “that a lot of people are waking up... It’s a genocide. Nobody can deny that,” she said.

The police crackdown is also meeting with growing opposition among lecturers. A statement initiated by over 100 Berlin lecturers and signed by over 130 other lecturers from Germany and abroad declares: “As lecturers at Berlin’s universities, our integrity obliges us to regard our students as equals, but also to protect them and not to hand them over to police violence under any circumstances.”

It was one of the duties of the university management “to strive for as long as possible for a dialogue-based and non-violent solution. The Executive Board of the FU Berlin violated this duty by having the protest camp cleared by the police without a prior offer of dialogue. The constitutionally protected right to assemble peacefully applies regardless of the opinion expressed.”

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