

# Stop the censorship of war opponents and attacks on freedom of expression at Humboldt University Berlin!

IYSSE Berlin  
14 June 2024

*The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are standing a slate of candidates for elections to the student parliament (StuPa) at Berlin's Humboldt University (HU) to take place June 18-19, 2024. Come to our next event June 17, at 7 p.m.: "The false accusation of antisemitism and the trivialisation of Nazi crimes at HU," (Audimax II at Campus Nord of HU, Philippstrasse 13, 10117 Berlin).*

Since the brutal police operations against peaceful student protests at the Free University and against the student occupation of the Institute of Social Sciences at Berlin's Humboldt University (HU) in April and May, the attacks on opponents of the war and critics of the genocide in Gaza have become ever more severe. The IYSSE is calling on students and university staff to protest against the massive restrictions on freedom of expression and academic freedom.

The scenes of aggressive police violence that took place at HU in May set a shocking precedent. As in a dictatorial regime, police officers beat up and arrested peaceful students who were protesting against the pro-war policy. A journalist from the *Berliner Zeitung*, who clearly identified himself as a member of the press, was also brutally beaten.

During the eviction of the student protest at the Institute of Social Sciences (ISW) on the orders of the Berlin Senate (state executive), lawyer Benjamin Düsberg was also arrested, although he made himself recognisable as a lawyer. Criminal charges were brought against him and over 20 other people involved on suspicion of breach of the peace. "The actions of the Berlin police have taken on a new quality," Düsberg told *Tageesspiegel*.

Indeed. The violent eviction of the ISW is now being used as a starting point to enforce an authoritarian police regime at the university. University management has filed criminal charges against the students involved for "trespass" and "damage to property," as announced in a letter to HU staff and students on June 11.

The police are also investigating seven members of the RefRat/Asta (Student Union) of the HU for "serious trespass." Those affected have applied to the student parliament for financial support for their legal fees. As they explain, it is the task of the student representatives to be present at events such as the ISW occupation: "We deeply condemn the fact that representatives are now to be prosecuted for having fulfilled their role as student representatives."

The criminalisation of students and their representatives in the RefRat is intended to spread a climate of intimidation and fear. Anyone who protests peacefully or expresses criticism of the massacre in Gaza and the complicity of the German government is to be persecuted and silenced.

The attack on basic democratic rights such as freedom of expression and assembly is not only directed against students, but also against lecturers and professors. The latest revelations by broadcaster NDR show how aggressively the federal coalition government of the Social Democrats

(SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP) is trying to suppress any form of dissent from its political line. Internal emails show that Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Free Democratic Party, FDP) wanted to take far-reaching authoritarian measures against academics in May.

After police officers stormed the Free University in April and used force to break up a peaceful Gaza protest camp organised by students, almost 400 professors and lecturers signed an open letter defending the students. The first signatories were joined by over 1,000 other lecturers. The Minister of Education then asked her departments to examine whether she could cancel funding already granted to the academics. She also looked for potentially criminally relevant statements in the open letter in order to use them against the lecturers.

This scandalous attack on academic freedom is a further step towards a right-wing dictatorship. HU doctoral student and political scientist Ilyas Saliba, who is researching authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, told *taz*: "Checking whether it is possible to take action against disagreeable academics under criminal, service and funding law is an authoritarian practice. We know this from the Middle East, North Africa or Hungary, where critical scholars are denied a future perspective in science."

Naika Foroutan, professor of Social Sciences at HU, who co-signed the open letter and is therefore herself in the crosshairs of the federal government, emphasised to *taz* that research was primarily financed by third-party funding, which often comes from the Ministry of Education. "I'm now wondering whether projects submitted by my institute or by colleagues who signed the letter will be assessed differently or rejected outright."

The education minister's attempt to introduce a censorship regime through the back door initially failed because her staff expressed concerns about her authority to take such measures. But no one should delude themselves that the federal government will not continue to look for ways to suppress critical academics.

Anyone who does not submit to the government's pro-war policy and accept the authoritarian methods of the police state will have the funding tap turned off and be threatened with criminal charges. Most recently, the smear campaign by the media and politicians against the president of Berlin's Technical University, Geraldine Rauch, showed that even harmless "likes" for posts critical of Israel are not acceptable.

On campus, university management is systematically cracking down on student opposition to the genocide. An IYSSE event on the topic was banned for months. That is why we, together with other student groups, held a powerful rally in front of the main building in December. Only a fortnight ago, two IYSSE events were authorised—albeit under strict conditions. Only members of the university are allowed to attend, and all bags must be checked at the entrances, including for "weapons

including pocket knives, batons or objects that can be used as such”—as if there had ever been any form of violence at IYSSE events.

These authoritarian restrictions are an act of political censorship and are aimed at intimidating and deterring participants. The IYSSE immediately protested against this in writing and called on the university administration to lift the restrictions. We explained: “As a university group, we want to hold a public event in which all interested parties can participate. The requirement would represent a serious restriction of the university as a public place.”

However, without addressing the content, the HU administration reiterated the requirement in another email and enforced it at the first IYSSE event. HU security staff carried out ID and bag checks at the entrance. Police officers were even posted in front of the entrance to the Audimax hall, where the event took place. The threatening backdrop and censorship are reminiscent of conditions in dictatorships. Students and lecturers are placed under general suspicion, their bags checked for weapons as if they were potential serious criminals.

People who are not members of a Berlin university were only able to follow the event because the IYSSE had organised a live broadcast in a public square. For more than 10 years, we have been organising events on political and historical topics at the HU and inviting all interested parties to join the discussion—students and university employees as well as young people and workers.

The title of the last event, which was recorded on video, posed the question: “What next in the fight against police violence and genocide?” The speakers explained that the genocide in Gaza can only be stopped by an international movement of the working class, which is directed against all wars and their root cause, capitalism.

It is this perspective—an orientation and extension of the student protests to the working class—that the university management and all parties in the Berlin Senate (state assembly) and federal government fear the most. That is why they want to keep the working class off campus with censorship and police measures.

Other student groups at HU are also affected. The student group “Decolonise Charité” had already invited students to an event on May 31 entitled “Being a doctor where there are no more hospitals” at the North Campus, which also includes the Charité Berlin University Medical Centre. Two doctors reported on the dramatic effects of the Israeli war on healthcare in the Gaza Strip.

But here, too, a security guard stood at the entrance on behalf of the university management and prohibited external participants from entering. Even an entire school class with its teacher was turned away by security. According to the organisers, 270 people attended the event. According to the group’s spokesperson, a new code for working groups at the Charité campus is also to be introduced, under which only working groups with a medical connection would be permitted.

These measures all have one goal: the truth about the war crimes in Gaza should not be heard, further resistance among students should be contained and a political discussion about the necessary conclusions from the protests should be prevented.

Against this backdrop, it is sheer mockery when the university management now declares in a letter dated June 11 that it wants to return to “peaceful and respectful discourse.” In the letter, university management calls for, among other things, a “study of definitions of antisemitism as well as a critical examination of social science theories to which an affinity for antisemitic patterns is attributed.” In plain language, this means that lecturers who deal critically with Zionism and the genocide of the Palestinians in their courses or writing are to be defamed as antisemites and subjected to attacks.

In its letter, the university management uses clichés such as an “in-depth academic debate” on the Middle East and “multi-perspective analyses.” However, its authoritarian approach to opponents of the war and

dissenting opinions on the Gaza genocide proves that it wants to bring the HU ideologically into line with the government and enforce full support for Israel and its war policy in the Gaza Strip.

While anyone who speaks out against the Israeli genocide is defamed as an antisemite, right-wing extremist professors such as Jörg Baberowski have been politically and financially supported for years. The HU history professor not only trivialises the Holocaust, but also legitimises authoritarian methods of rule.

In 2018, he wanted to set up a radical right-wing think tank for dictatorship research at the HU to investigate “dictatorships as alternative [social] orders.” Only the protests of the IYSSE and other students were able to stop the establishment of this “dictatorship centre.” Despite this, Baberowski has received plenty of research funding and political backing from the Ministry of Education. His ideas of an authoritarian state are now being put into practice.

In February 2020, Baberowski even tore down IYSSE election posters with his own hands and hit one of our StuPa representatives when he caught him doing so. University management then fully backed Baberowski and did not even decide on a complaint to the supervisory board. This effectively gave right-wing forces on campus a free pass to tear down IYSSE posters and attack its members. Last year, Ukrainian nationalists sabotaged our StuPa election campaign with the full backing of the university.

This year, the IYSSE’s election campaign is being attacked and censored again. Our posters were systematically and extensively torn down and destroyed by political opponents and university employees. Members of the IYSSE have documented this in the last few days and found several perpetrators tearing down the posters. The IYSSE called on the HU management in writing to “condemn these anti-democratic interventions in the election campaign and to take measures to stop them.” However, the university administration remains silent and thus backs the attacks.

The sabotage and censorship on campus is not an expression of the strength of the university administration and the federal government, but of their fear of growing resistance among students and workers. The European elections have once again shown how much hatred there is in the population for the parties of the coalition government and their policies of escalating war and social cuts.

The IYSSE are running in the StuPa elections on June 18-19 to fight among students for a socialist and international movement against war and capitalism. We will not allow socialists and opponents of war to be suppressed and will not be intimidated by the measures taken by the university.

We therefore call on all students: Protest against the authoritarian police regime at Humboldt University! Defend freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and academic freedom! Come to our next event in large numbers and elect the IYSSE (List 2) to the student parliament!



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