Students and academics protest massive cuts at Berlin universities

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Humboldt University)
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German universities are facing the biggest austerity programme of the postwar era. State governments in Berlin and other Länder (federal states) plan to slash millions from research, teaching and infrastructure.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is calling for opposition to these austerity measures and linking that resistance to the fight against war?driven rearmament and the increasing militarisation of universities and schools. The federal government intends to fund its vast €1 trillion war budget through dramatic cuts in science and education.

This year alone, Berlin universities must cut about €145 million, according to *Tagesspiegel*—€135 million from operational budgets (staffing, materials, administration) and €10 million from capital funding for buildings and equipment.

Ten percent of student places in Berlin are to be removed—approximately 25,000 places. Science Senator Ina Czyborra (Social Democrat, SPD) announced these cuts last Monday during the Science Committee session of the House of Representatives.

The Christian Democratic Union-Social Democratic Party (CDU–SPD) Senate has suspended the higher education contracts negotiated for 2024–28 with Berlin universities. The committed funding will not be released, forcing institutions to exhaust reserves and eliminate positions and courses.

Affected are the four universities (Free University, Humboldt University, Technical University, University of the Arts), Charité medical university, four universities of applied sciences—including Alice Salomon UAS for social work—and art, music and drama colleges.

Students, academics and university staff are shocked and sounding the alarm. A protest demonstration is scheduled for Monday in front of the Senate Department for Science, Care and Health, coinciding with the final round of renegotiations, which are expected to end in catastrophic cuts.

Last Wednesday, Humboldt University's Student Parliament (StuPa) called on "all students and university staff to resist the Berlin Senate's massive austerity plans." The resolution "Stop the Cuts at Humboldt University and All Berlin Higher?Education Institutions! Billions for Education not Rearmament!" was introduced by the IYSSE and passed unanimously.

Student representatives reaffirmed their opposition to the planned cuts, originally raised at a full student meeting on 23 January and in StuPa resolutions of 11 December and 28 January, also initiated by the IYSSE. "We will not allow this social devastation to be carried on the backs of students and lecturers!" they stated, denouncing the federal government's "massive increase in the war budget while cutting education, housing and healthcare."

They noted further that "Berlin is also experiencing increased societal repression, with rising police budgets, construction of fences and expanded powers under a proposed police reform."

They called on students and teaching staff in Berlin and across Germany "to unite with workers in other sectors and fight this social devastation together." This month, Humboldt University's Student Parliament will convene an online full assembly to discuss next steps against the cuts with all students.

Resistance is also growing among university staff. Over 2,000 Berlin professors and academic staff have signed an open letter—initiated by employees at Free University—warning of the consequences of "heave-ho action" (a rushed measure) to implement and sustain cuts this year. They caution that beyond reduced student places "important research groups and academic programmes" are at risk. For example, archaeology and social/cultural anthropology at Free University are said to be endangered.

The letter states: "The cuts mean overcrowded seminars, fewer graduates, overworked staff, dilapidated buildings. They endanger Berlin's economic future!" It warns that universities are being "financially starved" and will be unable to offer adequate academic engagement with current social developments.

> At a moment of rising far?right influence and multiple crises, universities—as centres of critical thought, socially relevant research and democratic diversity—are indispensable. As scholars of this city, we refuse to be played off against each other... We oppose the cuts and demand that the Berlin Senate fully withdraw them.

Signatories include a large majority of Berlin's professoriate—absurdly, the signatories also include Humboldt University President Julia von Blumenthal, who is responsible for implementing the cuts and previously, as dean, supported austerity measures at Humboldt. When the cuts were announced last year, she told *Tagesspiegel* on 26 November 2024 that she supported the

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austerity agenda and was involved in cabinet preparations.

She said that “Berlin must save money,” but objected only to how the cuts were being made. In short, Blumenthal is the Senate’s willing enforcer—but insists on choosing where to wield the budget axe.

Blumenthal has also long fostered far?right ideology and war propaganda at Humboldt University, suppressing student protest against German war policy and the genocide in Gaza. She and her predecessor, Sabine Kunst, have for years attempted to transform the university from a “place of critical thought” into a right?wing cadre-training ground.

The Humboldt University leadership under Blumenthal is not an ally in the fight against cuts—quite the opposite. On more than one occasion, she has proven to be so closely networked with the Senate that she helps suppress and prevent protests in line with the state government’s objectives.

The same destructive role is being played by the unions, Verdi and the Education and Science Workers’ Union (GEW), both now mobilising support for protests. After a harmless “action week” with small midday demonstrations at campus refectories, a protest is scheduled for Monday 14 July in front of the Berlin Science Administration.

Verdi seeks to defuse opposition by raising hopes of legal action against the Senate. It asserts that only pressure on the Senate and possible litigation over its “contract breaches” is required. Julia Dück, Verdi’s higher education secretary, said in a press release on 3 July: “If the Senate does not budge, universities must sue.”

Die Linke/Left Party is similarly focused on legal options. Tobias Schulze, scientific policy spokesperson for the Die Linke parliamentary group in the State Assembly, stated: “If the government does not provide the funds agreed in the higher education contracts, the universities can sue with good prospects. The Senate may even be liable for damages.”

Die Linke—presenting itself to young people as a social alternative—cannot be trusted. As a coalition partner between 2002 and 2011 and 2016–2023, it oversaw brutal austerity measures that made Berlin “the capital of the poor,” particularly in education.

What the unions and Die Linke fail to acknowledge is the direct link between these cuts and the federal government’s pro-war agenda. This is not surprising—they, like the IG Metall union, support rearmament.

Verdi’s leader Frank Werneke (SPD member) and GEW chief Maike Finnern both welcomed the “infrastructure special fund” approved as part of the war programme, earmarked to finance roads, railways and bridges suitable for war. The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), on behalf of all affiliated unions, emphasised “the need in Germany and Europe to make greater collective efforts to become more defence?capable,” explicitly backing monstrous war credits.

How can a union that supports war be a credible opponent of cuts to universities, which, according to the ruling class, are required to fund those same war plans?

To conceal this betrayal, Verdi occasionally issues toothless criticisms of rearmament—such as in a press release after the June NATO summit mandating 5 percent of GDP defence spending. Yet at the same time, it fully supports rearmament and works to isolate and suppress resistance, in close collaboration with the governing parties, especially the SPD.

These cuts threaten to shake the foundations of public education. To prevent them, resistance must be independent of the government?aligned unions. The IYSSE therefore calls for the formation of rank-and-file action committees, where students and university employees can organise and prepare measures, coordinating nationally and internationally with workers in other sectors.

While Berlin—as Germany’s largest centre of science and higher education—is particularly affected, this devastation is happening everywhere. Baden?Württemberg’s CDU?Green coalition has imposed crushing austerity on its universities.

In North Rhine?Westphalia, the CDU?Green state government plans staggering cuts of €255 million from 2026. In Cologne on Thursday, roughly 150 students protested against the looming cuts. At the end of June, students at Bielefeld University occupied a lecture hall. There, the cut?back spree has already begun: all history tutorials—in which first?year students typically learn fundamental concepts—were cancelled on short notice. Around 30 student assistant positions were also axed, according to broadcaster WDR.

In Hesse, governed by a CDU?SPD coalition like in Berlin, universities will see up to €1 billion cut over the next five years. As the *Frankfurter Rundschau* notes, Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences is already terminating two engineering courses. Across Hesse, thousands protested against austerity last Tuesday.

The anger and willingness to mobilise among students and teachers is considerable. But for resistance to succeed—and to avoid fizzling out into toothless “midday protests” orchestrated by unions—it requires the development of a socialist movement committed to revolution.

This generalised attack on science and education—to fund weapons and tanks for imperialist wars—exposes the decay of this society. Capitalism is on its deathbed. It must be overthrown, and the big corporations and banks must be expropriated so that the billions in profits can be invested in research and education in the interests of society, creating a world?class system accessible to all. Support this struggle and join the IYSSE!

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