

Amid protest against attacks on Berlin universities, union leader demands seat at the table to decide on cuts

Our reporters
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On Monday morning, some 1,500 students, academic staff and university workers gathered outside the Department for Science and Health in central Berlin to protest against the Senate's plans to make massive cuts to the city's universities, cultural sector and hospitals.

The Berlin Senate is made up of a coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Formerly, the Berlin Senate had promised to increase the budget for the city's universities by five percent per year up until 2028. Now, however, following the decision by the federal government to invest one trillion euros in preparations for war and reconstruction projects, the Berlin Senate has reversed its decision in favour of a new round of cuts. The main spokesperson for the cuts is Berlin Education and Health Senator Ina Czyborra (SPD).

If the cuts are implemented, it is estimated that the higher education system in Berlin will have to reduce its student numbers by up to 25,000, together with the loss of dozens of professorships. The city's Free University (FU) anticipates 14 percent fewer student places, (approximately 4,800), and the Technical University (TU) a cut of 5,000 student places. A spokesperson at the demonstration said that a reduction of 10 to 20 percent student places hovered over Humboldt University (HU).

In discussions with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters on Monday, a number of protesters made the link between the cuts to be implemented at the universities and the massive increases agreed by the German government for military re-armament. What was most striking at the demonstration was the complete failure to address this issue by any of the trade union bureaucrats and academics speaking from the podium.

Various appeals were made to the city's politicians to rethink their plans, in the form of a protest Open Letter to the Senate by academics and proposals for legal action against the Senate's decision to break contractual agreements, but no mention was made of the government's preparations for war.

The position of Germany's main public service union, Verdi, was summed up by union secretary Julia Dück, who admitted that the union had held an initial protest back in May but

nothing had changed. She then declared in her speech to protesters that the union "demanded a seat at the table when it came to deciding upon the cuts."

No other statement could better sum up the bankruptcy of the union. The main issue for Verdi is not to oppose the cuts, but rather to take part in deciding when and where the axe should fall. Tens of thousands of students, academics and other university staff will lose either their places or their jobs, but the union bureaucracy, with all its privileges, remains intact.

As for the silence of the union regarding the government's plans to slash social gains and promote war, this is easily explained. The fact is that Verdi supports the government's war drive.

Just days after the government passed its war budget, the national head of Verdi, Frank Werneke, justified the arms buildup on the union's webpage as follows: "Europe must be able to defend itself; the Bundeswehr must be operational." He went on to praise the government's special fund for reconstruction, which also serves to prepare for war, as a "real opportunity to resolve the investment backlog in our country."

WSWS reporters spoke with a number of students and university staff attending the demonstration.

Markus, a campus worker at the Free University in Berlin, said:

I am here because I am very critical of the cuts being made to education and research in order to buy more weapons and finance one war after another. These cuts affect the entire social system, not just education. The more people who are left uneducated, the more politicians can encourage a culture of war. It is important to make this connection. The situation is already catastrophic, and with more cuts to education, the situation can only get worse. War and the culture of war profit from ignorance.

This is taking place everywhere on an international scale. Everywhere there is massive propaganda for war. People are alarmed and a climate of fear is being spread,

which makes it easier to manipulate people. This climate is also exacerbated by the leftist parties, which are also in favour of war. For example, in the last (German) government, the Greens were the party which campaigned most militantly for war.

Carlos, a researcher from HU, said:

I come from Argentina, and we have the same problems there with cuts in the social sector. Milei cut the budget for public universities by 71 percent, which led to numerous protests. Some universities are on the verge of closure. Support programs for schools, teachers, and school meals have also been cut. Regional social programs and funding for education and health have been cut in the provinces. We are experiencing a rapid increase in poverty and hardship there because of the high inflation. It's a very dangerous development, and we have to see what we can do; protests alone aren't enough.

A research student at the TU was critical of Verdi:

The question is why Verdi is only starting the protests today, at the last minute, so to speak. The cuts were announced months ago. I'm also surprised that more students aren't here today. They may not yet know that not only the academic staff, but they themselves will be affected by the cuts if entire degree programs and study places are eliminated. It is estimated that around 5,000 study places will be lost at the TU alone. Funding for education should not be the sole responsibility of the federal states, but rather the responsibility of the federal government. In this respect, it is misleading for the Berlin Senate to point to a lack of funds in the Berlin budget.

A research assistant from the FU said:

There is a climate of fear and unpredictability regarding the impact of the cuts. This can affect academic staff, for example, by not filling vacant positions. Professorships are not directly affected by the layoffs, they were hired as civil servants with guaranteed contracts. However, their work will be indirectly hindered by the cancellation of degree programs or research funding.

An FU employee conducting research in the city's Botanic Garden declared:

What bothers me about this whole thing is that massive funding is being cut in the cultural sector and in science, while the government has allocated hundreds of billions for weapons. These are not separate political decisions; the connection between the two is very close. We should unite across Europe against the cuts and the rearmament, since it's the same problem everywhere. The situation is quite depressing, but I'm interested in your IYSSE and will report back to my colleagues on the website.

WSWS reporters and representatives of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed a statement at the demonstration calling for the formation of action committees in which students and university staff could discuss and prepare actions and coordinate with workers in other sectors nationally and internationally. The statement also emphasized the need for an independent socialist perspective to counter the attacks on universities. It stated:

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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