

“We are not cannon fodder!”

Tens of thousands of students strike throughout Germany against militarisation and conscription

Our reporters
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From Berlin, Munich and Dresden to Dortmund, Essen and Stuttgart, tens of thousands of young people took to the streets on December 5 in more than 90 cities to protest against the reintroduction of conscription. The demonstrations were a powerful expression of the enormous opposition to German militarism and the danger of a third world war.

The nationwide school strike was directed against the “Military Service Modernisation Act,” which was passed the same day in the federal parliament (Bundestag) with the votes of the governing parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). From the start of 2026, all 18-year-old men will be subject to compulsory registration and medical examination, and as soon as the number of “volunteers” is insufficient, they will also face compulsory call-up to the military.

In Saxony alone, around 2,000 pupils took part in the demonstrations. “Up with education, down with armaments,” they chanted in Dresden. “We are not cannon fodder!” and “Send [chancellor] Merz to the front” appeared on hand-made placards in Essen. One slogan recalled the xenophobic agitation of the chancellor aimed at migrants: “Too bad for the urban environment, but good enough for the front.”

Most participants linked the fight against conscription with the broader struggle against militarism and war, and some also addressed the underlying cause of this development in capitalism, even if there was often uncertainty in assessing current military conflicts and the active role of the German government as a warmonger.

But many of the organisers involved have done everything they can to restrict the protests to a rejection of “forced service” and to exclude the central issue: the government’s preparations for war. This is hardly surprising. Among the organisers are the youth wings of the same parties that support rearmament and voted for the trillion-euro war credits: the Green Youth, the Young Socialists (Jusos) of the SPD, and the Left Party’s Linksjugend. The trade unions Verdi (service sector) and GEW (education and science), which verbally expressed support for the school strike, have also come out in favour of rearmament.

At the protests, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), by contrast, emphasised that the reintroduction of conscription was directly bound up with the return of German militarism. Their leaflet, distributed across Germany, stated:

The return of conscription is part of the militarisation of society as a whole. Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, the German government is once again preparing to march an entire generation into the barracks and the trenches to sacrifice young

lives for the economic interests of the ruling class. The CDU/SPD coalition is driving the rearmament of the Bundeswehr forward at breakneck speed.

Capitalism, the leaflet continued, was once again leading to barbarism and war, as it did in the twentieth century. Therefore, the only realistic perspective for stopping conscription and war is the international mobilisation of the working class based on a socialist programme. Such a movement must orient itself against all capitalist parties, which are all driving militarism forward.

Representatives of the IYSSE discussed this perspective with striking pupils in Berlin, Essen, Nuremberg, Stuttgart and Munich.

Berlin

In Berlin, the state government of the SPD and CDU sent a letter to all school heads instructing them to “inform” pupils that participation in the protests would count as unauthorised absence and could cause problems with health insurance. Despite this threat, 3,000 pupils gathered at Hallesches Tor and Oranienplatz.

Many pupils agreed that the working class must be mobilised against militarisation. As **Laurenz** said: “Workers are the ones affected, but also the ones who have to stand up against it and cannot simply let it happen.” Three other pupils agreed: “We should definitely strike more, including the workers. Also on other issues, such as for Palestine.”

Others spoke out against the massive rearmament programme. “If all countries keep arming internationally, it leads only to an endless spiral. In reality there needs to be disarmament everywhere in order finally to create peace.”

Claims by the ruling class that rearmament served solely defensive purposes were met with scepticism. **Lene** said: “It is all just a cover to conceal the real reasons. In the end it will not be the politicians and the rich standing on the front but the poor and low-income workers, while the others sit warm at home.”

Essen

Around 400 pupils demonstrated in Essen against the introduction of conscription.

Elisa (18) said: "I am against war. I think conflicts can be solved differently. It is a terrible idea that my brother or relatives could be sent to war." Her classmate Johann, aged 15, considered the danger of a major war real. He criticised the diversion of funds from climate protection into the military.

Bilal, a 15-year-old class rep at a comprehensive school, said: "Now we are seeing them throw a huge amount of money into the military instead of education, for example. That absolutely has to change." Pupils in his class have been protesting for years that they have to clean their own toilets. The mood in his class is overwhelmingly against conscription, but "most did not dare to come today because the head teacher forbade it."

Nati, 16, is horrified that children are once again to be forced to fight with weapons. She is also worried about the turn to the right in Germany. Not even 100 years had passed since the Nazi era, she said, and yet this history is not being confronted so that it will not be repeated. "Instead, they say again that we need conscription, we need people at the front, instead of looking at the world and seeing that we already have enough wars and should not force anyone into such a situation again."

She agreed that war arises from capitalism. She supports fighting for an international movement of the working class and youth, as advocated by the IYSSE. She rejected nationalist thinking, especially in view of the history of National Socialism. She also opposed German involvement in the war against Russia: "Then young people would die on the battlefield in a war they should not be fighting."

She considered the "social injustice of our society" a major problem: "The rich enrich themselves more and more, while the poorer part of society suffers, homelessness grows, and the problem of hunger and housing becomes greater. And we are still discussing whether we should not tax this tiny percentage of super-rich more."

Blagovest and **Leon** attend a vocational college in Gladbeck and travelled specifically to attend the demonstration. Blagovest, 20, believes the reason for reintroducing conscription lies largely in the fact that politicians and banks want to profit more from war. Leon, 18, said the establishment parties offered no alternative: "The same people are always at the top. No matter which party it is, they always do the same thing. Something worse always happens that goes against humanity. And that makes you very afraid." Leon stressed: "It is about our future as humanity." If there were a major war, everyone would die—"no matter your skin colour or whom you married".

Stuttgart

In Stuttgart, around 1,500 pupils took part in the protest against conscription. Many highlighted the link between war and capitalism. One placard read: "Do not let yourselves be bought; you are not politicians," and another: "Conscription? Muster yourselves instead." A banner at the front of the march read: "Red Front, not Eastern Front."

Several young people spoke not only against conscription but also against the horrendous rearmament programme and Germany's role in the war in Ukraine and in Gaza. **Valentin**, a 17-year-old student, emphasised the connection between war and capitalism: "I do not want to die for the capitalist interests of a few." On the perspective of building an international anti-war movement of the working class, he said: "Yes, I think that is good, that would be important."

Leo and **Julius**, both aged 17, pointed out that rearmament was financed by cuts in social spending. "We are here today to demonstrate against conscription, but also so that the voice of youth is heard. There is a lack of

money everywhere in schools, a driving licence now costs 4,000 euros; money has to be invested in people, not in war," they said.

Munich

In Munich, more than 1,000 pupils gathered at Giesing station. Many carried hand-made signs expressing opposition to conscription or denouncing the government. Many agreed broadly that the government could not be trusted and acted against their interests. The IYSSE's perspective met with strong interest. Many pupils raised the fact that cuts in education and social services were being implemented to finance rearmament.

Nuremberg

In Nuremberg, more than 400 pupils protested against the planned reintroduction of conscription. Hand-made placards read: "We want to live in peace, not die in war!" and "We are supposed to die for your capitalist interests? Resist." The protest was also supported by many concerned parents who held signs reading: "You will not take my children."

Fabién, a pupil from Nuremberg, summed up the opposition of many young people. He said he was striking "because we want to demonstrate together against the impending conscription laws," and emphasised that these attacks could only be understood in the context of a deepening capitalist crisis. The ruling powers could defend their global interests "only with authority and violence," he said, which is why militarism, rearmament and war are escalating. He sharply condemned the hypocrisy of the Left Party (Die Linke), which publicly opposes conscription while supporting the €100 billion 'special military fund' for the Bundeswehr. Such organisations, he said, "pose with hypocrisy" and are not part of any real anti-war movement.

Moritz, a student at the University of Erlangen, also strongly criticised the hypocrisy of the Left Party and the Greens. He described their appearance at anti-conscription protests as "dishonest", since they simultaneously "vote for the special military fund" and thereby support rearmament. Anyone who publicly opposes conscription and at the same time supports war credits shows that "they lack the backbone to change anything."

He criticised such parties for trying to persuade the population into "left-wing thinking" that was limited to a few social demands within the existing system, and which inevitably ran up against limits. These were "empty demands that may seem to make sense within this parliamentary context" but offered no real alternative. Their politics were not socialist, he argued, but designed to lead young people and workers into the dead end of parliamentary illusions. At the same time, however, Moritz stressed that young people who joined the Left Party or the Greens out of sincere concern should not be excluded.

Both young people made clear that the fight against conscription can only be won if it is not restricted to youth alone but becomes a conscious, international movement of the working class. Fabién emphasised that "all oppressed layers of the population must be mobilised" to counter militarism and repression and to overcome the capitalist system that produces these attacks. Moritz added that the current school strikes represent only "the first step of political awakening" and that the decisive task is to develop this into a "workers' protest."



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