

Budget cuts at Berlin's universities—Archaeology Department at Humboldt University set to close

Clemens Huber, Florian Hasek
13 July 2026

“What gets cut with money saved? Research, education, the present day!”—with this chant, more than 200 students, faculty members, and museum staff gathered on June 4 in front of the main building of Berlin's Humboldt University (HU). They were demonstrating against the planned closure of the Institute of Archaeology, which offers not only Classical Archaeology but also the Archaeology and Cultural History of Northeast Africa program—a program that is unique in Germany.

This important cultural and scientific institution—one of the oldest institutes of archaeology in Germany, which has existed 200 years and withstood two world wars—is now set to be destroyed, while the German federal government pours billions into the military and arming for world war.

On their protest standards, the students warn: “Today us, tomorrow you” or “A stab in the back for Winckelmann”—a reference to the institute's namesake, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an Enlightenment thinker who helped found scientific archaeology in Germany in the 18th century.

On June 17, the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Cultural, Social, and Educational Sciences at HU decided to close the institute as part of its budget cuts. On Instagram, the student council and the institute explain what this means:

With today's decision to close the Institute of Archaeology, the faculty has chosen to bury a tradition spanning more than 200 years at the Humboldt University of Berlin and is sending a clear message: against academic diversity, against expertise in cultural studies, and against solidarity with the so-called “minor disciplines.” Today, archaeology at HU is being laid to rest. Who will be next?

The post received over 18,600 likes. In hundreds of comments, followers express their horror and show solidarity with the students' protest. More than 20,000 people have now signed a petition against the closure.

Amid the antique frescoes in the HU main building, where the institute is located, students hung posters protesting the institute's closure. They demand: “Preserve knowledge instead of cutting roots” and ask ironically: “When will the excavation begin?!”

The impending closure of the archaeology department is just the tip of the iceberg. Since April 1, 2026, a comprehensive hiring freeze—set to last until the end of 2027—has been in effect at the HU: Vacancies in positions funded by the budget are to go unfilled for at least six months. As early as 2025, the university was already facing a shortfall of 24.4 million euro; a comprehensive cost-cutting plan covering all departments is in development. The HU expects to employ

significantly fewer junior researchers in the future.

The HU administration is willingly implementing the Berlin Senate's cost-cutting targets. Without batting an eye, University President Julia von Blumenthal defended the amended university contract—which includes the cuts—before the student parliament in early May. Approximately 35,000 students are enrolled at HU and are affected by the cost-cutting measures.

All state-funded universities in Berlin are subject to the same austerity measures. Originally, the Berlin Senate—composed of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD)—had promised to increase subsidies for the universities by five percent per year. However, it renegotiated the university contracts for 2025, significantly cut the subsidies, and imposed austerity requirements totaling 145 million euro on the universities, with austerity measures to continue in subsequent years. Ten to 14 percent of Berlin's university enrollment slots are to be eliminated.

In 2026, the Free University will have to make do with 42.79 million euro less. All departments and administrative units will face a roughly 10 percent cut in their personnel budgets; above all, temporary positions—and thus junior researchers—will be eliminated. The cuts are to be spread over eight to ten years.

The Technical University must permanently cut 65 million euro—15 percent of its budget—by the end of 2028. As early as 2025, it announced plans to eliminate 18 tenured professorships as well as many times that number of research assistant positions. The TU expects at least 5,000 fewer enrollments, while the backlog of renovations for its dilapidated buildings amounts to 2.4 billion euro. “The financial situation and the budget cuts are major challenges, as is the condition of our buildings. In that regard, the overall mood is gloomy,” said TU President Fatma Deniz.

The University of the Arts (UdK), where approximately 4,500 people are enrolled, expects a deficit of 7.5 million euros by 2028. Seventeen professor positions, 18 mid-level faculty positions, and 27 administrative positions are set to be eliminated; the master's program in Art Song/Oratorio/Concert will be discontinued; and in some departments, double-digit cuts in enrollment slots are looming. The UdK itself refers to this as the “most far-reaching restructuring” since the cuts of 2003–2004.

The University of Applied Sciences (HTW) must cut its budget by 41 million euro by 2028. As a result, 430 enrollment slots could be eliminated each year—320 at the bachelor's level and 110 at the master's level—and approximately 80 further positions are expected to be cut. Among the programs under consideration for elimination are

the distance learning program in Mechanical Engineering, the master's program in Construction and Real Estate Management, and the distance learning program in Business Administration. The bachelor's program in Conservation, Restoration, and Excavation Technology will no longer accept new students starting in October 2026.

The Berlin University of Applied Sciences and Technology (BHT) already cut eight million euros from its 2025 budget and must draw an additional 15 million euros from its reserves by 2028. Thirty-four tenured professorships will be eliminated, 320 bachelor's program spots will be cut, the programs in Electric Mobility and Computational Engineering and Design will be discontinued entirely, and of the two physics programs, only one will be retained. The number of available enrollment spots will also be reduced in building and energy engineering, food technology, mechatronics, and mechanical engineering.

Berlin's Charité medical university is being hit particularly hard: In 2026, it will receive a total of 56 million euro less in grants for research and teaching. According to initial calculations from the summer of 2025, the number of student enrollment slots was to be reduced by 50 percent in applied midwifery, by 25 percent in dentistry, by 19 percent in health sciences, and even by 10 percent in human medicine. Following fierce protests, particularly from midwives, it became apparent by the end of 2025 that the cut in midwifery enrollment might not be fully implemented—though final confirmation of the adopted 2026-27 biennial budget is still pending.

These austerity measures have a massive impact on students' lives—ranging from fewer enrollment spots, lower-quality teaching, research, and student support, to more expensive cafeteria meals, shorter library hours, a lack of financial and psychological support services, and dilapidated university buildings that are not being renovated.

These cuts are not a one-off but a direct consequence of the government's war policy. The ruling Merz-Klingbeil administration has increased defense spending to 109.7 billion euro—the largest military budget in Germany's postwar history. After the recent 100-billion-euro “special fund” for military expenditures expired, the government mobilized another trillion euro for its war policy by suspending the so-called “debt brake” for defense spending and establishing a 500-billion-euro special infrastructure fund. In the future, five percent of gross domestic product is to be allocated to military purposes.

To finance this, comprehensive cuts to social services are underway. The “citizen's income” (Bürgergeld) social security program has been abolished; the so-called pension reform raises the retirement age; and in the healthcare sector, 20 billion euro in cuts are planned for health insurance funds. In addition, the coffers of the states and municipalities are being plundered. The Berlin Senate is now recouping the money through cuts to education.

While academic institutions such as the Institute of Archaeology are on the chopping block, the budget cuts are also being used as leverage to drive forward the militarization of universities. For example, the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW Kiel) is receiving a new high-level professorship at the HU. The IfW Kiel is a think tank that advocates for the financing of military rearmament and, as far back as the Nazi era, advised the government on matters of the war economy and arms policy.

In the face of these drastic cuts, university administrations are not standing with the students but rather standing on the other side of the

barricade. This is especially true of HU President von Blumenthal, who for years has supported the far-right professor Jörg Baberowski, who downplays Hitler's war of extermination and advocates for the extreme-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) to join the government. She has also supported the suppression by the police of student protests against the genocide in Gaza.

The unions, which nominally support the protests, likewise offer no way out and even advocate for increased military spending. Julia Dück, the secretary of the Verdi service workers' union responsible for universities, during a protest rally merely demanded a “seat at the table” in decisions regarding the cuts, while Verdi leader Frank Werneke openly welcomed the government's 500 billion euro special infrastructure fund, which is primarily intended to make roads and railways suitable for war. In a statement, the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) explicitly backed the war credits.

Even the German Left Party, which likes to present itself to young people as a social alternative, voted in favor of the one-trillion war package in the Bundesrat (German Federal State Council) and, together with the other parties, turned Berlin into the “capital of poverty” while it was part of the state government.

There is strong opposition among students and staff to the cuts. At the initiative of the IYSSE (International Youth and Students for Social Equality) campus group, the student parliament has already passed three resolutions opposing the austerity measures. More than 2,000 Berlin-based academics have signed an open letter opposing the cuts.

The IYSSE, which in June once again won three seats in the HU Student Parliament, is the only campus group to declare that resistance to the austerity measures can only succeed if it is linked to the struggle against war and the militarization of universities.

Appeals to university administrations, the Senate, or the federal government are doomed to failure. Instead, students and faculty must turn to the working class and build independent rank-and-file committees that coordinate militant actions nationwide and internationally with workers in other sectors. Only a socialist program that calls for the expropriation of large corporations and banks and the redirection of their profits toward education and social infrastructure can stop and reverse the cuts.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact