Berlin: multiple protests against Rheinmetall armaments factory

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The streets of Berlin have become the centre of a growing confrontation with the German state over the presence in the heart of the city of the Rheinmetall armaments factory. Rheinmetall is one of Europe's biggest producers of ammunition. Hundreds of anti-war demonstrators, joined by the climate activist Greta Thunberg and campaigners from Germany and abroad, have targeted its Berlin factory in the course of the past week to protest against the German government's campaign to make the country "fit for war."

Last weekend a demonstration through Berlin-Wedding under the slogan "Wedding ohne Waffen—Gemeinsam gegen Krieg" ("Wedding without weapons—Together against war"), drew around 3,000 participants. One of the groups participating in the demonstration was the organisation Peacefully Against Genocide (Friedlich gegen Genozid), which has pledged to use non-violent civil action to oppose Germany's political, military and economic support for Israel during the Gaza war.

The organisation has drawn attention to the fact that, in addition to being a major supplier of weapons to Ukraine in its NATO proxy war against Russia, Rheinmetall has longstanding partnerships with Israeli defence companies, particularly Elbit Systems, supplying artillery and ammunition technologies.

Rheinmetall also has cooperation agreements with Rafael Advanced Defense Systems (missile and anti-tank technologies) and is involved with Israeli partners in the development of a 155-mm artillery system and combat drones. Germany is, after the US, Israel's second-largest arms supplier, and Rheinmetall is widely regarded by protesters as a symbol of the close relationship between German rearmament and Israel's genocidal war campaigns in Gaza, now extending into the West Bank and Lebanon.

Demonstrators assembled at 2 p.m. last Saturday at the Gesundbrunnen Centre in Berlin Wedding, but the start of the march was held up for an hour in sweltering heat after police requested the repeated reading of a list of all the do's and don't's demanded by the state before the demonstration could set off. Additional time was lost after renewed demands by the police for demonstrators to remove masks from their faces.

Apart from a single banner from the German teachers Union (GEW) and a group of workers from the Tesla mega factory situated in nearby Brandenburg no trade unions were visible on the demonstration. This is due to the fact that the German trade union movement, and in particular Germany's biggest union, the IG Metall, actively support the government-sponsored transition to armaments production.

The demonstration was planned to march several kilometres through the suburb of Wedding, past the Rheinmetall factory to a central meeting place. The march was stopped, however, after a kilometre by a massive police presence, including many police vehicles blocking the street leading to the factory entrance.

Following isolated protests earlier this year barbed wire fencing has been erected around the entire site and, in addition to private security, dozens of police with police vehicles have been commissioned to protect the factory day and night.

Forced to break off their march demonstrators expressed their frustration with the police tactics to members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) who distributed hundreds of copies of the article "Berlin's CDU-SPD government turns German capital into a centre of war production."

The use of massive lines of police to block streets and routes, the reading of proscriptions on all sorts of behaviour by protesters and the aggressive means employed by the police to arrest and intimidate demonstrators have characterised the mass protests carried out in recent months and years to oppose the complicity of the German government in the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Now these same tactics are being used and expanded to intimidate and defuse all opposition to Germany's preparations for a Third World War.

The weekend mobilization was followed by several days of actions at Rheinmetall facilities across the capital, including blockades, protest camps and demonstrations

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outside the company's offices near the Brandenburg Gate. On Monday, activists—including Greta Thunberg—staged another sit-in outside Rheinmetall's Berlin office, gluing themselves to entrances in an attempt to disrupt the company's operations. Police detained participants, including Thunberg, and removed the blockade.

Thunberg's video has received thousands of likes.

The choice of Berlin-Wedding as the centre of a new phase of German rearmament is a provocation. It is no wonder that it has become a focal point for political protests.

The central suburb of Wedding has long been a working class district with a rich tradition of labour struggles and anti-fascist resistance. Due to the opposition of workers to the Nazis and the extent of support for communism in the 1920s and 1930s, the district won the name "Red Wedding."

One of the main tasks of Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels upon being sent to Berlin, was to mobilise Nazi stormtroopers to physically crush the opposition to the fascists in Wedding. In the meantime, the composition of the district has changed following the integration of large migrant communities but it remains a hub for some of the poorest and most oppressed social layers in the capital.

In the course of the SGP campaign to gather the signatures necessary for participation in the Berlin House of Representatives elections in September, many residents in Wedding expressed their vehement opposition to the arms factory in the middle of a densely populated urban district.

Faced with soaring prices, multiple attacks by the government on social benefits and crumbling infrastructure in hospital and schools, residents lent their support to the SGP's demand that the massive amounts of money spent on weapons of war be diverted to satisfy urgent social needs.

In discussion with this reporter, a number of those attending the militant actions against militarism carried out last week and who had been active in past years in the campaign to stop the genocide in Gaza expressed their resignation at the fact that so little had been achieved. The numerous appeals at protests and demonstrations directed to the German and all other bourgeois governments to stop supporting Israel and cease their military preparations for new wars have all fallen on deaf ears.

The response of the German government to the latest protests is precisely to increase the powers of the police and the state apparatus in order to crush the social opposition to the massive cuts to jobs and social benefits planned for the coming months.

A fundamentally new perspective is required based on a conscious turn to the working class to build a mass movement against war and the capitalist system which gives rise to it. This is the perspective put forward by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei in its intervention in the upcoming Berlin Senate election.

The most recent election statement of the SGP begins:

> The danger of a nuclear war has never been greater than today. The Merz-Klingbeil government is rearming on a scale not seen since Hitler and is brazenly preparing for a war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power. The cost of this madness is being borne by the workers through mass redundancies, cuts to social services and, ultimately, with their lives.

The statement then continues:

> Here in Berlin, it is particularly clear what the consequences of the subordination of all areas of society to profit interests and preparations for war are. Growing poverty, skyrocketing rents, dilapidated schools and hospitals and job cuts are the result of a deliberate austerity policy designed to fund rearmament.

The statement concludes:

> That is why it is so important now to support the SGP's election campaign. We do not seek lucrative positions or participation in a government with the parties of war. We use the election campaign to warn workers of the enormous dangers, provide them with a socialist program, and organise resistance against war, dictatorship and social inequality. We will use every seat we win in the House of Representatives as a platform for this struggle.

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