

Germany: Massive cuts at universities in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse, protests in Kassel against militarisation

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10 August 2026

The return to militarism and war by Germany's ruling class is exacting its toll in every area of society. Alongside hospitals, nurseries, schools, care facilities, pension funds and basic benefits, universities are also facing cuts running into the billions. In Berlin, even the renowned Institute of Archaeology at Humboldt University is threatened with closure. The devastating consequences of the austerity policies for students and aspiring academics are also making themselves felt in the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and Hesse.

From this year, universities in North Rhine-Westphalia must make do with around €120 million less annually. "With this decision, the state government is breaking a central promise from the 2020 Future Agreement 'Strengthening Study and Teaching' and is sustainably jeopardising the quality of study, teaching and working conditions at the universities," stated a declaration of the state AStA (students' union) conference last December.

At the University of Cologne alone, €10 million are being cut annually. Among other things being eliminated are the Master's programme in Political Science, research in "disability studies" and the areas of early childhood support and gerontology.

Ruhr University Bochum must also save €10 million this year, and by 2035 as much as €30 million annually, of which €20 million from the faculties and €10 million from the administration. In concrete terms, this means that 32 professorships and 45 administrative posts will no longer be filled. The research areas hardest hit are those in which there is barely any third-party funding.

At the University of Wuppertal, €4.6 million are to be cut annually. In the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering, known beyond the region for its focus on sustainable construction, six professorships are to be eliminated over the next 10 years. The university management originally even planned to let all 12 professorships in the area of architecture lapse and entirely cut the associated degree programme, currently attended by 500 students. This provoked protest rallies by students, and several professional associations wrote open letters to the university leadership sharply criticising the

plans. These were subsequently scaled back, so that the architecture programme is now to be retained for the time being.

Other universities in NRW where savings must be made include the University of Münster (€10 million annually), the University of Bielefeld (€6.2 million) and the University of Siegen (€4 million). The impact on teaching is in some cases severe: the reduction in administrative and technical staff also increases the workload there and the rate of sick leave among the remaining employees.

The cuts are falling at a time when the social situation confronting students in NRW is already very difficult. An average room in a shared flat costs around €485 a month; in Cologne and Düsseldorf it is even over €600. Sixty-five percent of students in NRW must work alongside their studies to finance these high rental costs.

For the student services organisations—in NRW responsible among other things for running the refectories and providing student halls of residence—state grants account for only 10 percent of total revenues, whereas the social contributions of students account for over 25 percent. Every other federal state spends significantly more per student per year.

Universities in Hesse are also subject to considerable pressure to cut spending. Last year the universities were forced to hand over €475 million from their reserves—money originally earmarked for building and renovation work—to prop up the Hesse state budget.

The Hesse Higher Education Pact, which regulates university financing from 2026 to 2031, provides for budget reductions totalling €30 million for this year. Only from 2027 are state grants to rise again. Given the increased costs of construction, energy and personnel, this means that Hesse universities must reckon with a total deficit of around €1 billion over the period to 2031.

Goethe University Frankfurt, the largest in the state, must save more than 10 percent of its budget from 2026. Concretely, 455 study places are to be cut from the winter semester 2026/27 in degree programmes with limited admissions. Since last year, appointments and position-filling have also been suspended,

initially until September 2026.

At Justus Liebig University Giessen, where the cuts amount to €25 million annually, more than 100 full-time posts have already been eliminated. Here too, no posts are to be filled until the end of 2026.

Protest against militarisation in Kassel

The University of Kassel must save €14 million annually. Planned are the elimination of 30 professorships and savings in the administration. At the same time, the senate is attempting to abolish the civil clause in order to enable closer cooperation with the arms industry.

Instead of the existing commitment to the effect that research and teaching must serve exclusively peaceful purposes, the new civil clause is to read: “Researchers and teachers are aware of the problematic nature of distinguishing between the potentially civilian or military utility of their activities.” In other words, the separation between civilian and military research is to be progressively dissolved. The justification given is a reference to so-called “dual-use research”—that is, the banal fact that many technologies can have both civilian and military applications.

Over recent months students have mounted fierce resistance to the new plans to militarise the University of Kassel. A student general assembly called specifically to discuss the issue drew 800 people, far more than the organisers had expected. The vote in the senate on the civil clause has now been postponed to November.

Kassel is one of Germany’s largest sites of armaments manufacture and is known above all for tank production. Rheinmetall and KNDS (formerly KMW) each have several plants here with a total of around 4,600 employees. The city is also home to EuroPULS GmbH, a joint venture between KNDS and the Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems set up to build a rocket artillery system.

During the Second World War, the Henschel works, which today belongs to Rheinmetall, were of great importance for the production of lorries, war locomotives, tanks and guns. Several thousand forced labourers, mainly from Poland and the Soviet Union, were compelled to toil here for the armaments industry under inhuman conditions.

Today, the University of Kassel’s Holländischer Platz campus is located on a former Henschel factory site. In 2014 the university opened a “Path of Remembrance” with information panels, commemorating “the history of the misuse of science and technology” and “the participation of academics from all disciplines and fields in the ideological and practical preparation of Nazi crimes,” as the official website puts it. The aim is a memorial “that also appeals for the future to the responsibility of science in dealing with research results and in

the use of technology.”

Such warnings today collide with the hard reality of government war policy. German imperialism is attempting to place the University of Kassel and other universities in the service of war and rearmament, as it did in the 1930s.

Alongside direct research collaboration with the universities, the arms corporations are above all interested in well-trained specialists. KNDS is already offering several dual study programmes in Kassel—with the University of Economics and Management, among others— and from 2027 also with the Technical University of Central Hesse. The collaboration of Rheinmetall and KMW with the University of Kassel was discontinued in 2023 due to the civil clause there. That is why the civil clause is a thorn in the side of industry and politicians.

All these examples show where the “new era” in defence and foreign policies and call to make Germany “war ready” are already leading in practice. While hundreds of billions of euros are thrown into the craw of the arms corporations and the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), and Germany’s leading stock index, the DAX keeps reaching new record highs, massive cuts are being pushed through at universities and throughout education and social services.

That the Left Party and the GEW education union organise no nationwide protests against this speaks volumes about the character and function of these organisations. Their most important concern is to safeguard the interests of the capitalist state and to undermine any independent movement of workers and young people that by its very nature is directed against capitalism.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student organisation of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and the International Committee of the Fourth International, calls on all students who seriously want to resist the massive cutbacks at the universities to contact us and to familiarise themselves with our socialist strategy against war and capitalism. Students can win this fight only by joining their struggles to those of the international working class and consciously working to overthrow the capitalist system.



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