

“No future without universities”: Student protests in Vienna

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Against the backdrop of Europe-wide mass protests, a major demonstration took place in the Austrian capital, Vienna, last week, on October 22. Around 50,000 people gathered under the slogan “Red alert – #SaveTheUnis”, among them students, lecturers and university staff. The Austrian Students’ Union (*Österreichische Hochschülerschaft*, ÖH) had called the protest. Doctors and employees from other university cities also travelled to the demonstration.

“No future without universities,” “Cut the cut” and “Make the super-rich pay! Lecture halls for the masses!” read homemade placards. Above all, the students and staff were protesting against the underfunding of universities. For the years 2028 to 2030, the university budget remains at around €16 billion, the same level as before. Given the rise in costs, this inevitably leads to far-reaching cuts. Universities anticipate having to save 10 to 15 percent and cut up to 6,800 jobs. Study places would also be affected.

In addition, this budget must now cover the funding for the Interdisciplinary Transformation University Austria (IT:U), a technical university in Linz focused on digitalisation, and for doctors’ salaries, which had previously been financed on top of the university budget.

The demonstration was the high point of student opposition so far this year. As early as May, around 28,000 students demonstrated in Vienna. On October 13, the ÖH organised a “Ring Lecture” (a pun on Vienna’s Ringstrasse, Ring Street) against the austerity policy. Thousands of students blocked Ringstrasse with a protest rally. Two days later, students occupied the main hall at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

The cut to the university budget is part of a broader attack on education that stretches across Europe. In Germany, universities face the biggest austerity programme of the postwar period; the state governments are planning to slash millions from research, teaching and infrastructure. For example, Berlin’s universities already had to accept massive savings in 2025 despite major protests.

In Vienna, the protesters are demanding sufficient courses, good supervision, fair working conditions and no additional tuition fees or barriers to access. Bianca Ivan, press spokeswoman for the ÖH, said, “Our central demand is that the federal government improves the announced university budget

by October 31 and closes the funding gap.”

In its press release, the ÖH also calls for “a fairer distribution of society’s wealth, including through wealth and inheritance taxes on large fortunes, as well as the dismantling of fossil fuel and climate-damaging subsidies.”

But these demands are addressed to a government that is currently claiming billions of euros for its war policy. Around €4.76 billion was budgeted for the Austrian armed forces in this year’s budget. Including budgetary authorisations, the Defence Ministry puts the funds available for 2026 at €5.18 billion. This is an enormous increase compared with 2022, when spending was €2.7 billion. Like Germany, the Austrian government has used the Russian invasion of Ukraine to justify its own military rearmament programme.

The “Austrian Armed Forces 2032+” build-up plan provides for investment in armoured vehicles, aircraft, airspace surveillance, new weapons systems, digitalisation and military infrastructure.

The Court of Audit has meanwhile put the planned investment costs of the build-up plan for 2025 to 2036 at €49.2 billion. At the same time, the government continues to pursue the goal of raising defence spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2032.

The cuts are not an isolated budget decision but the flip side of a policy that prioritises rearmament. What is spent on tanks, fighter jets, air defence and drones, and on building up the repressive powers of the state apparatus at home, is not available for education, healthcare, housing and social security.

While some students at the demonstration drew a direct connection to the billions of euros going into armaments projects, the ÖH organisers and university management ignore this connection. The reason is that they are tied to the same parties that decided on and are implementing this rearmament programme.

The ÖH is the statutory representative body for students in Austria and is currently led by the student organisations close to the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the Greens: the VSStÖ (Association of Socialist Students in Austria) and GRAS (Green and Alternative Students).

Their parent parties themselves have helped create the misery in education and social services. While the Greens were part of

the federal government from 2020 to 2025, the SPÖ belongs to the current governing coalition with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the liberal NEOS. It holds the post of Vice Chancellor and six ministries, including all of those directly responsible for implementing austerity: housing, arts, culture, media and sport; labour, social affairs, health, care and consumer protection; finance; women, science and research; innovation, mobility and infrastructure; and justice.

The policies of all the bourgeois parties have led to growing poverty due to stagnating wages, unemployment, rising rents and living costs, as well as higher homelessness. The number of people at risk of poverty rose from 1,288,000 in 2024 (some 14 percent of the population) to 1,441,000 in 2025 (nearly 16 percent). In Vienna alone, according to Statistics Austria, 11,512 people were registered as homeless or without housing in 2024.

According to the latest student social survey, students spend on average 38 percent of their budget on housing. In nominal terms, their housing costs have risen by around half since 2015.

The Vienna demonstration is taking place at a time when class struggles in Europe are expanding at a rapid pace. In recent days and weeks, no fewer than nine countries have experienced mass protests—not only France but also Albania, Serbia, Spain, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Portugal and Ireland. In Germany, demonstrations in more than 20 cities are planned for October 31.

In France, the protests began over the catastrophic conditions in schools and quickly developed—not least in response to the brutal use of police force—into social mass protests against high rents, low wages, war and police violence. On Saturday, 800,000 people took to the streets in France.

As the WSWs has explained, this Europe-wide movement is driven by real class issues: “the lack of any prospects for the future for young people; rising living costs, energy prices and rents; the squandering of hundreds of billions on armament and war, while pensions and spending on social welfare, healthcare and education are being slashed; the unbridgeable gulf between an oligarchy whose luxury knows no bounds and the mass of the population who have to count every penny.”

The ruling class is responding with smears and calls for repression. Leading Austrian politicians also used the violence at the French protests to warn of a similar development in Austria—and at the same time to blame immigrants and migration policy for the “chaos.”

Petra Steger, a member of the European Parliament for the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), declared on October 19, “France is burning: The catastrophic consequences of a completely failed immigration policy!” She claimed the violence was “largely directed and supported by left-extremist groups” and showed “where decades of looking the other way on mass immigration and left-wing extremism lead.”

Former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) also warned of comparable scenes in Vienna. He stressed, “For me, this is the

consequence of almost two decades of failed immigration policy. ... If we do not change course immediately, we will soon see the same scenes in Berlin, Vienna and Munich.” He also spoke of a “toxic mixture of left-wing radicals, violence-prone immigrants and ideas of political Islam.”

Chancellor Christian Stocker (ÖVP) took up this line. He wrote that Europeans had to talk “honestly” about the consequences of immigration over recent years. Immigration, he claimed, had brought attitudes and conflicts “that are not ours” to Europe. In this way, the social causes of the protests are being covered up and replaced with xenophobic lies.

Given the Europe-wide movement of students and teachers, it is remarkable that the official student representative bodies in Austria say not a word about it. While Greek demonstrators have openly declared their solidarity with the French protests, the ÖH is trying to confine the opposition to a national framework.

Apart from the participation of university staff in the demonstration, the ÖH makes no appeal to the working class, which is the only social force that, through mass strikes, is capable of stripping the rulers of power. This is precisely where the decisive question for the movement lies.

During the Austrian student protests of 2009, the Socialist Youth of the SPÖ and the Green Alternative Youth also tried to bring the occupation of the main lecture hall (Audimax) at the University of Vienna under their control and choke it off, instead of orienting it to the working class.

But adequately funded education and good working and study conditions, of the kind the Viennese students are demanding, cannot be achieved through national reforms from above under capitalism. The ruling class is neither willing nor able to make such concessions.

It is necessary to free the movement from the influence of the establishment student associations and the bourgeois parties and to orient it to the emerging struggles of the working class against social cuts and war.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fights among young people worldwide for a socialist programme and calls on students in Austria to contact the IYSSE in order to found local groups.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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