Germany: More than 120,000 young people protest against crumbling education system and war

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With Gen Z protests taking place in more than 30 German cities, the youth movement against social devastation and war has now spread to Germany. More than 120,000 young people took to the streets on the last Saturday in October. The largest protests took place in Berlin, with 15,000 participants, and in Stuttgart and Cologne, with 10,000 each.

They thus joined a youth movement that has been spreading for weeks from France through Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Albania and Serbia across Europe, finding expression in the slogan "Education, not bombs!"

On thousands of handmade cardboard placards, the mostly very young participants denounced the crisis in education, exorbitant rents and social cuts, linking these issues to militarism and war, on which the government is spending billions. "With your actions, you are taking away our future," a student in Frankfurt had written on his placard.

Zara, a school student from Bielefeld, carried a sign reading "Healthcare is suicide-prevention." She explained that mental health is a major issue for many young people. "Mental health among us young people is deteriorating." Current political and social developments were frightening many, she said, but now the government was also cutting funding for psychotherapists and psychiatrists.

John, an 11th grade student at a vocational high school in Berlin, took part in the protests "because I am against conscription. I don't want to go to war." He knew "that the people fighting against me aren't my enemies, but rather the people giving the orders."

In many cities, older participants joined the young protesters out of anger over the war policies and social cuts. Many accompanied their protesting children.

Other issues raised in the demonstrations included social inequality, the obscene enrichment of the wealthy and the rise of fascism. Holger, an engineering student from Frankfurt, where finding affordable housing has become virtually impossible, said: "The housing crisis has now become one of the worst problems."

Sarah and Lena, two young women, cited cuts to social services as the main reason for their participation. Sarah, who works at a women's shelter in Frankfurt, said: "There was already very little money available for us, but now sometimes there's nothing left at all, and you have absolutely no idea how things are supposed to continue."

Sarah identified the causes as "these shitty policies that keep spending more and more money on weapons and on the rich. You really can't call that a welfare state anymore."

Many pointed to the international connections with the protests in Paris, Milan, Rome and Barcelona. Placards bore slogans such as "Do as they do in France" or, in French, "L'histoire nous donne raison" ("History is on our side").

The protests developed independently of the trade unions and political parties. In several cities, pseudo-left and Stalinist organizations joined the demonstrations, but they did not play a dominant role. The young people clearly opposed the government, which "supplies the whole world with weapons, even for the genocide of the Palestinians," and numerous Palestinian flags could be seen.

The demonstrations and protests were marked by the anger of Gen Z over current political developments. In some cities, including Berlin and Stuttgart, differences emerged over the orientation of the protests, resulting in demonstrations splitting into two separate marches.

But in every city, it was obvious that the young people's demands and protests were shaking the foundations of capitalism, even if not everyone was immediately conscious of this. A young participant from Rostock said in Berlin: "We're here because we're critical of the system. We don't like the way things are going, and we want to speak out against it."

This made the intervention of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) all the more important. Members and supporters of the IYSSE and its parent party, the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), participated in demonstrations across the country and distributed thousands of leaflets containing the IYSSE statement, "Education, not war! Mobilize the working class against social cuts, conscription and the police state!" IYSSE members also published video statements addressing the central issues.

In Stuttgart, the approximately 10,000 school students and young people gathered on Schlossplatz expressed genuine opposition and anger toward the political establishment. Anti-capitalist and socialist views were widespread.

Florian Hasek, speaking for the IYSSE from the moving sound truck leading the crowd, received enthusiastic applause when he declared: "Against growing nationalism and the drive to war, our struggle must be international."

He warned against allowing the Left Party and its pseudo-left appendages to restrict the movement to making "appeals to the very government" against which "we are protesting." The Left Party, which was currently negotiating participation in a Berlin government—with a spending cap on social services and additional millions for the police who beat demonstrators—was "not an ally; it is part of the problem."

He concluded:

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> Instead, we need democratically organized rank-and-file committees—in schools, universities, workplaces and neighborhoods. Committees that we elect and control ourselves, independently of all capitalist parties and trade union apparatuses. And these committees must unite across national borders in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Our goal must be a Europe-wide general strike against war, dictatorship and social devastation! Build this movement! Join the IYSSE! Socialism or capitalist barbarism!

While hundreds of thousands of young people were demonstrating peacefully, the police used violence against numerous demonstrations. In the cities with the largest turnouts, police provoked the marches by arbitrarily stopping them, forcing them into confined spaces and surrounding sections of the crowds. Particularly brutal police operations took place in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne and Berlin.

A scene in Cologne clearly demonstrated the provocative character of these operations. Under the pretext that a few individuals were "masked" and that fireworks had been set off, the entire demonstration of 10,000 people was stopped and ordered to disperse. The police quickly deployed a water cannon, and a unit of around 100 officers stormed the scene. Even a reporter from the public broadcaster ZDF was knocked down while reporting live.

In other cities, thousands of heavily armed riot police were deployed. They were supported from the air by helicopters and police drones and on the ground by water cannons and armored vehicles.

Rioting did occur in some cities in the evening, including Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne and Hamburg, as well as Nuremberg and Stuttgart. There, smaller groups "helped themselves" to goods in shops or engaged in their ritualized skirmishes with the police. These clashes clearly had nothing more to do with the Gen Z protests. Nevertheless, the media are now using these images to discredit the demonstrations.

The federal government under Friedrich Merz (CDU) is well aware that it is the target of the protests. In Erfurt, where around 1,500 people had gathered, a young protester told the WSWS: "Our demands are common sense. But we live under a government that will not implement them."

That is why, even before the protests began, the government had attempted to spread hysteria through the media and smear participants as dangerous troublemakers and terrorists. For weeks, the media have also reported on events in other countries, focusing almost exclusively on the few instances of violence and rioting rather than the hundreds of thousands and millions of people demonstrating peacefully in cities across Europe.

In Erfurt, IYSSE member Clemens Huber addressed the protesters from the main stage:

> The government's reaction shows how seriously it takes us: It is mobilizing the domestic intelligence service, the police and the media to smear us as violent and extremist. [...] In France, the police have already arrested more than 10,000 young people, torn off the hand of a 15-year-old and blinded several young people.
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> This repression follows a clear logic. It shows that the rulers are not prepared to make concessions. They resort to violence because they want to impose the demands of the financial markets and the enormous costs of rearmament against our resistance.

With the demonstrations of 200,000 young people, the spark of the Europe-wide protests has spread to Germany. The numerous placards, banners and discussions showed that this movement is on a collision course with capitalism. It is therefore necessary to develop the protest wave—with Europe-wide Gen Z protests planned for November 20—into a conscious, international and anti-capitalist, that is, socialist movement.

Christoph Vandreier, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, declared at the Gen Z protest in Berlin:

> The demonstrations are international, they are organized independently of the capitalist parties and trade unions, and they are on a collision course with capitalism. The Socialist Equality Party fights to consciously develop these questions and thereby strengthen the movement's self-awareness.

The simultaneous emergence of protests across Europe must give rise to a genuinely international movement that not only organizes independently but consciously breaks with the capitalist parties and trade unions and turns toward the working class.

Ultimately, the movement must be developed into a conscious movement against capitalism. The fact that the rulers are responding to the mass demonstrations with repression shows that they are not prepared to make any concessions. Capitalism offers young people nothing but barbarism, fascism and war. The movement must therefore turn toward a socialist perspective.

The IYSSE therefore invite everyone to an online discussion on Monday, November 2, at 7 p.m. (CET), entitled: "From the youth protests to the international class struggle: What perspective is necessary?" More information here.



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