German university calls in police to suppress protests against lifting ban on military research

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Last week, in the early hours of Thursday morning, police violently cleared a lecture hall at the University of Kassel in the German state of Hesse. Around 100 students had occupied Lecture Hall 1 after the university senate voted on Wednesday, 4 November, to abolish the civil clause (Zivilklausel). The clause was the university's self-imposed commitment that its research and teaching must serve exclusively civilian purposes—in effect, a ban on military research. The university is thereby no longer bound by this commitment. The move throws the door wide open to close collaboration between the university and the arms industry.

The students occupied the lecture hall following a peaceful protest rally outside the senate chamber, in which hundreds of students and staff took part. University management refused to tolerate the occupation and took brutal action against it. "Only after hours were the students given access to water and food, and it was hours later still before they were allowed to use the toilets," states an open letter from university employees condemning the "massive presence and aggressive conduct of the police."

During the overnight clearance of the lecture hall, which lasted until 6:30 a.m., the police even deployed special officers trained to intervene at height to remove students against their will from a window ledge five metres above the ground. According to the police, some people could be removed from the hall "only by physical force." Before the clearance, the university management had filed a criminal complaint for trespass, which it has now withdrawn. The police, however, are continuing to investigate 47 people for alleged violations of Hesse's Freedom of Assembly Act. In addition, three criminal complaints have been filed for physical assault on police officers.

The brutal action taken by the police and university management against the student protests shows how nervously the ruling class in Germany is reacting to the growing opposition among young people to war and social cuts.

Students in other cities across Germany held solidarity actions with Kassel, for example at the Free University of Berlin, where students had simultaneously occupied a lecture hall at the Otto Suhr Institute to protest against the cuts and militarisation of Berlin's universities.

The occupation in Kassel took place against the background of the mass protests that have spread across the whole of Europe in recent weeks—from the school strikes and blockades in France, mass demonstrations in Madrid, Athens, Vienna and Brussels, to the nationwide "Gen Z regelt" (Gen Z sorts it out) protests by more than 120,000 young people in over 30 German cities on 31 October, whose main demands were no conscription, better education and social support, affordable living, stronger climate action and a political say.

Everywhere, the destruction of education and social security is bound up with rearmament and preparations for war. In Kassel, this connection appears in a particularly sharp form. While the university has to save €14 million a year and eliminate 30 professorships, the senate is opening it up to close collaboration with the arms industry.

That is why the civil clause was repealed. The previous wording in the preamble to the university's basic statutes read:

> Research and development, teaching and study at the University of Kassel are **committed exclusively to peaceful goals and are to fulfil civilian purposes**; research, in particular the development and optimisation of technical systems, as well as study and teaching, are directed towards **civilian use**. [Emphasis added]

In the new version, this commitment to "exclusively" peaceful goals has been deleted entirely. The wording is now completely non-binding:

> In research, teaching and transfer, the University of Kassel is committed to the preservation of peace, the avoidance of war and the strengthening of the free democratic basic order. In this spirit, research, teaching and transfer at the university are to serve peaceful purposes. **Researchers and teachers are aware in particular of the problematic nature of distinguishing between the civilian and potentially military utility of their activities.** They act with a responsibility to contribute to the peaceful coexistence of humanity. [Emphasis added]

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The decisive point is the reference to so-called dual-use research, i.e., the fact that many research findings can be used for both civilian and military purposes. In practice, the new version means that the University of Kassel can now conduct research and teaching for military purposes without any reservations or obstacles, for example in the allocation of third-party funding.

The senate's decision stands in open contradiction to the declared will of the students. In a student ballot, 82 percent of those taking part voted to retain the civil clause. Almost one fifth of all students participated in the vote—a considerably higher turnout than in comparable ballots. The senate simply disregarded this result. Students had already protested in the summer. A student general assembly drew 800 participants, after which the senate vote was initially postponed to November.

Hundreds of university employees also spoke out in favour of retaining the civil clause. A petition by the staff initiative "Zivile Universität Kassel" (Civilian University of Kassel) received 476 signatures from university employees, including 50 professors, as well as 400 from supporters in academia and wider society.

The change to the civil clause is not an isolated event at a single university. It is part of the nationwide militarisation of the universities being driven forward by the federal government of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD). Under the watchword of "war readiness," the universities are being systematically placed in the service of rearmament.

The president of the University of Kassel, Ute Clement, defended the senate's decision and the violent clearance. In a statement, she stressed that decisions of the university's self-governing academic bodies had to be accepted. The autonomy of the universities was an achievement that should be valued and that created spaces for free scholarship, she said. The ability to compromise was an indispensable building block of democracy.

Her appeal to "autonomy" and "democracy" is cynical. Above all, she wants to act autonomously—that is, independently—of the students, not of the state and the arms companies. The senate disregarded the students' vote and the employees' petition and opened the university to the arms industry against their declared will. And while the president speaks of the "ability to compromise," the students' protest was put down with special police units.

Civil clauses emerged in Germany in the 1980s in the course of the peace movement and were a concession to the mass resistance at that time to rearmament and the integration of science into war preparations. The first civil clause came into force at the University of Bremen in 1986. Since then, around 70 higher education institutions have adopted one. Today, this concession is being withdrawn.

The federal government of the CDU and SPD has explicitly set itself the goal of militarising science and education. As early as 2023, when he was still in opposition as CDU leader, Chancellor Friedrich Merz declared in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, "So-called civil clauses, which prohibit military research at universities, should be repealed. They are no longer in keeping with the times."

In 2024, the then federal education minister, Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Liberal Democrats, FDP), also called for the civil clauses to be repealed, declaring that research was not only a geopolitical factor but, even more, an integral component of German security.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the civil clause was abolished in 2019 by means of the state's higher education act. Now Kassel is following suit. The abolition of the civil clause is a step in the escalation of the war. German imperialism is rearming on a massive scale and preparing for a direct confrontation with Russia. For this it needs the universities, both as sites of weapons research and as a training ground for skilled personnel for the arms industry.

In Kassel, this connection is especially obvious. The city is one of the largest arms manufacturing centres in Germany. Rheinmetall and KNDS employ around 4,600 people here, alongside EuroPULS GmbH, a joint venture between KNDS and the Israeli arms company Elbit Systems. The collaboration of these companies with the University of Kassel was discontinued in 2023 because of the civil clause. Now it is being made possible again.

The University of Kassel stands on the site of Nazi arms production. Today's Holländischer Platz campus is located on what was a central factory site of the Henschel works. During the Second World War, the Henschel works were of great importance for the production of lorries, military locomotives, tanks and artillery. Several thousand forced labourers, mainly from Poland and the Soviet Union, were made to toil here for the arms industry under inhuman conditions.

The parallel is unmistakable. Then as now, science and research are being subordinated to the war policy of German imperialism, while the social gains of the population are destroyed. The continuity is also evident in the companies themselves. The Henschel works today belong to Rheinmetall—the same company that now wants to resume its collaboration with the University of Kassel.

The violent response to the student protests in Kassel has proved one thing: appeals for peace addressed to university management and to the federal and state governments are futile. These politicians follow the profit interests of the ruling class; they do not base their decisions on the moral restraints of a civil clause. Students can successfully fight the militarisation of the universities only if they build a revolutionary movement in the working class—the only social force capable of overthrowing the capitalist system, which leads inexorably to war.



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