International youth strike against war: Tens of thousands of young people take to the streets in Germany

Our reporters
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As part of the Europe-wide school strike, tens of thousands of young people once again took to the streets in Germany on Friday, November 20, to demonstrate against conscription, rearmament and the crisis in education. In the first coordinated Europe-wide protest action, hundreds of thousands demonstrated simultaneously in more than 20 countries against the madness of war and social devastation.

The previous evening, Chancellor Friedrich Merz (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) had invited all European heads of government to a war summit at the Chancellery in Berlin to advance the escalation of the Ukraine war and the confrontation with Russia. The government's rearmament frenzy drove young people onto the streets in more than 100 cities, including smaller and medium-sized towns, to protest against the enormous danger of war.

In some cities, unsuccessful attempts were made to channel the movement behind political parties, trade unions or official organizations. In Frankfurt, a rally was held at the Weseler Werft, organized in close coordination with the police and attended by the warmongers of the Green Party. However, only a few dozen people turned up.

By contrast, more than a thousand participants joined an alternative march through central Frankfurt in the evening, defying the massive police presence and pouring rain with slogans such as, "The rich want war, young people want a future."

The situation was similar in Berlin. There, the Federal School Students' Conference, together with Fridays for Future and the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW), had called a rally at the Brandenburg Gate on issues such as education and climate change but explicitly *not* against war. As a result, barely a hundred people attended, while the Berlin demonstration against conscription, co-organized by Gen Z activists, attracted around 10,000 participants.

Opposition to war played a central role in every discussion conducted by *World Socialist Web Site* reporters. Lou, a student in Berlin, said: "I don't want to die in a war, especially not when it's only being fought for the interests of capital in this country." He explained that a war would "certainly happen at some point" because those in power see it as "the only way out of the many crises in this country."

Joschi, a press spokesperson for the Berlin School Strike Committees Against Conscription, directly linked the reintroduction of conscription to rearmament: "This isn't about us somehow having to defend ourselves. After all, Chancellor Merz openly says that Germany should have the strongest conventional army in Europe. And we're supposed to die for that, we're supposed to be mowed down by drones so that Germany can gain more power in Europe."

Joschi also referred to the planned Rheinmetall arms factory in Berlin, which would turn the city into "a potential target for bombing raids" in the event of war. He demanded: "This must be stopped immediately."

According to Joschi, behind the danger of war lies "a capitalist system in which we young people are simply told: 'You young people in Germany want something different from young people in France.' (...) It's a system that pits us against one another."

Emma, who has been working in Berlin since graduating from high school, explained that she believed the demonstrations were tolerated "to give people the feeling that they have a big say in things. But the politicians aren't really forced to change anything."

In Frankfurt, Anna, a young bakery sales assistant, said: "I'm here against war because I think it's simply terrible that so many innocent people have to die for power and money. You can see it in Palestine too, where so many children are dying senselessly." She demanded: "We mustn't just talk about it. We finally have to show openly that we oppose it."

Tim, who works at a metalworking plant near Frankfurt, said: "My main concern is this: How can it be that a small handful of people claim all the wealth for themselves and then send us off to a war that they started, not us, and that we don't even want?"

Tim had come with his friend Lars. One of their placards read: "The honest Basic Law: Human greed is inviolable."

Alongside the danger of war, social inequality was one of the demonstrators' main concerns. Many identified capitalism as the source of the problems.

As during the first Gen Z protests on October 31, many demonstrators welcomed the international character of the new movement. Christoph, a student from Berlin, for example, explicitly welcomed the protests in France and explained that what was needed was "a more profound transformation than is currently possible within this system."

He continued: "Politics is conducted in the interests of capitalism and the big corporations. And that automatically means policies against our future, because they are policies against people." His conclusion was: "In the end, democracy probably isn't really compatible with capitalism."

Tim made a similar point, saying that he did not know of any capitalist country where genuine democracy existed. If it were up to him, there would be "a system of councils."

The demand for a Europe-wide general strike, which the IYSSE

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raised in their leaflet, met with broad support.

In Berlin, Joschi took up the IYSSE's demand, saying: "At my school, someone even wrote on the wall: 'From the school strike to the general strike'—from an international youth strike to an international general strike. That would obviously be the ideal outcome." He concluded that the movement could achieve something only if it did not allow itself to be co-opted by the capitalist parties.

That opposition is also brewing among workers in Germany was demonstrated by a warning strike in the metal and electrical industries on the same day. Around 150,000 workers participated in the 24-hour walkout. Although IG Metall is pursuing the goal of imposing real-wage cuts in coordination with the companies, the enormous opposition among workers evidently compelled it to organize the strike to let off steam.

Many participants in the Gen Z protests pointed to the social problems resulting from the ruling elite's focus on rearmament. Anna, a bakery sales assistant, said: "I'm also here because so much funding for therapy places is being cut right now. People who urgently need this help are being deprived of it."

The interviews demonstrated that many young people increasingly understand the connection between war, austerity and capitalism and are prepared to take up the struggle against them. However, illusions persist about how to conduct this struggle, although they do not appear to run particularly deep.

For example, some young people in Berlin expressed hopes for a coalition of the Left Party, Social Democrats and Greens under the leadership of the Left Party. Yet the Left Party had only just made clear that it was prepared to carry out sweeping cuts in almost every area—with the exception of the police.

Several IYSSE members who were able to speak at rallies and meetings demonstrated how such illusions can be overcome. IYSSE member Clemens Huber spoke at a general assembly at the Free University of Berlin during a discussion about the goals of the movement. A previous speaker had called for increased pressure on the Left Party in Berlin.

Clemens opposed this:

> It would be completely wrong to orient this movement toward putting pressure on a party like the Left Party—which, for example, supported the special fund of over one trillion euros for rearmament in the Bundesrat last year, which is now responsible for cuts in education and social spending; which has just abandoned all its election promises in Berlin at breakneck speed. What is needed now is the building of action committees in every workplace, every school and vocational school and every neighborhood.

His remarks were met with loud applause. Clemens also called for expanding the movement throughout Europe and giving it an anti-capitalist and socialist orientation.

In Stuttgart, IYSSE member Florian Hasek was able to address the demonstration from the main stage. Around 2,000 young people participated despite a massive police presence. He emphasized:

> Rents are rising, schools are deteriorating, unemployment is growing. And hanging over everything is the insane policy of war. In Ukraine, the NATO powers deliberately provoked Putin's reactionary invasion in order to wage a proxy war against Russia. The issue is the mineral resources of both countries and the subjugation of Eastern Europe. For this, they are risking the nuclear annihilation of the entire continent. The European governments have declared that they want to be capable of defeating Russia militarily within three years—a nuclear power. And they demonstrate every day, through their support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the crimes that the ruling elites are once again prepared to commit. This is the future capitalism has in store for us: We are to be exploited to the bone to finance rearmament—and ultimately sacrifice our lives on the battlefields of the rich.

To applause, Hasek declared: "The only force capable of overthrowing capitalism and preventing a world war is the international working class—the vast majority who produce all the wealth of society through their labor and who are expected to bear the entire burden of war and crisis. It can bring the warmongers to their knees."

For this reason, the protests had to be united with the struggles in the workplaces. As the speaker emphasized, a European general strike could bring the entire continent to a standstill and raise the question of political power: "Which class decides? Will society be organized according to the needs of the financial oligarchy or the needs of the people?"

Such a perspective required breaking free from the influence of all pro-capitalist parties and the trade union bureaucracy.

"To prevent war, to overthrow capitalism, we must organize—and do so independently. Independently of the Left Party, which approves war credits and talks left while pursuing right-wing policies. Independently of the trade union bureaucracies, which isolate workers and prevent every independent struggle."

He concluded his speech with a call to build independent rank-and-file action committees and received loud applause.



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