

Hundreds of lecturers condemn the police terror at Berlin universities

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Scenes of brutal police violence have taken place in recent days on German university campuses.

On May 3, following talks with university administration, police violently broke up a peaceful sit-in at Humboldt University in Berlin and initiated criminal proceedings against 37 persons. Last Tuesday, the Berlin police then besieged the Free University of Berlin (FU) on the instructions of the university management in order to break up a peaceful Palestine camp. Seventy-nine people were arrested and criminal charges laid against 80 protesters. In the following days, pro-Palestine camps at the universities of Leipzig (more than 30 criminal proceedings) and Bremen were also broken up by the police.

Germany's ruling class is returning to the methods of the Nazis: police terror, the suppression of peaceful protests and the besieging of universities. It is slandering, censoring and suppressing any criticism of its genocidal foreign policy.

Against this background hundreds of Berlin lecturers have published an open letter condemning the brutal police operations. They wrote that their understanding of their role as teachers at Berlin's universities obliged them to "treat their students on an equal footing, but also protect them and never yield them up to police violence."

In view of the "bombing of Rafah and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza," the "urgency of the protesters' concerns should also be understandable for all those who do not share all of their specific demands," the open letter continues. The right to peaceful protest also includes the occupation of the university grounds.

The university management has a duty to "strive for a dialogue-based and nonviolent solution for as long as possible." This duty was "violated by the executive of

the FU Berlin by having the protest camp cleared by the police without any prior offer of dialogue."

The letter ends with the demand that the Berlin university managements "refrain from police operations against their own students as well as from further criminal prosecution."

The letter quickly received broad support. By Monday, 374 lecturers from Berlin and over 950 other lecturers from all over Germany and other countries had signed the open letter. Among the signatories are the now retired Humboldt historian Prof. Michael Wildt; Ulrike Freitag, director of the Leibnitz Centre for Modern Oriental Studies; Florian Zemmin, director of the Institute for Islamic Studies at Humboldt University; philosopher Rahel Jaeggi; and sociologist Linus Westheuser.

At the same time, numerous student organisations have also condemned the police action. The students union (AStA) of FU Berlin published a statement on the day of the police operation strongly condemning "the repressive and escalating behaviour of the university against its own students" and called on the FU executive to resign immediately. A petition calling for the resignation of FU President Günter Ziegler received over 2,000 signatures within the space of a few days.

The open letter from Berlin lecturers is an expression of growing opposition among academics to the genocide in Gaza and the transformation of universities into military training centres. Commencing in the US, pro-Palestinian protest camps have spread throughout Europe. In recent days, camps have been set up at universities in 15 different European countries. In many countries, lecturers and academic staff also support the protests.

Politicians and the media have reacted hysterically

and aggressively to the open letter. German Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Free Democratic Party, FDP) told the *Bild* tabloid that the statement left her “bewildered.” The “university occupiers” were being “victimised and violence trivialised.” “The fact that the supporters are lecturers represents a new quality.”

Berlin Governing Mayor Kai Wegner (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) told *Bild* that he had “absolutely no sympathy” for the open letter. “Antisemitism and hatred of Israel” are “not expressions of opinion, but criminal offences.”

Christian Social Union internal affairs spokesperson and deputy chair of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group Andrea Lindholz went so far as to describe the letter as a “low point for German academia.” She had no sympathy for “professors and lecturers defending a mob of antisemites and Israel-haters.”

The vicious smear campaign against the lecturers culminated in an article in the *Bild* newspaper. Under the headline “The Culprits at the Universities—Israel-Hatred at Berlin Universities, Teaching Staff Support the Student-Mob,” the tabloid published by the Axel Springer press listed the names and portraits of 12 of the signatories. The online edition published a complete list of all the Berlin signatories.

This vile campaign has a reactionary and transparent goal: lecturers and professors are being publicly pilloried in order to incite a right-wing mob against them, intimidate any opposition to the genocide and step up the suppression of protests.

The *Bild* article recalls the Springer press’ smear campaign against Rudi Dutschke and other student leaders at the height of the 1960s student movement. In February 1968, *Bild* published an article titled “Stop the terror of the Young Reds now!” A few weeks later, the right-wing extremist Josef Bachmann, incited by the article, shot Dutschke three times with a firearm. Dutschke survived the shooting seriously injured, but died some years later as a result of the attack.

The agitation by politicians and the media, the fuelling of a pogrom atmosphere against professors who dare to protect their students against brutal police violence and defend the right to free expression, underlines that it is not possible to persuade those in power to change their policies through pressure. The greater the opposition to the prevailing imperialist war

policy, the more aggressively the government lashes out. Anyone who rejects their policies is declared fair game for right-wing extremist thugs and police.

The growing wave of opposition at the universities is significant. The protesting students and the lecturers who defend them are showing great courage in the face of massive repression. The success of this movement, however, depends on a turn to the working class and the adoption of a clear international socialist perspective. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and its youth and student organisation IYSSE.

As a recent WSWS Perspective states:

The working class—whose labor is the source of all wealth, united across national borders by global production, and whose interests are diametrically opposed to imperialist war—is the most powerful social and political force in the world. It must be brought to bear to end the wars, connected with its struggle against capitalist exploitation. ... The ruling class is so terrified of the peaceful student protests because it knows they can arouse the working class.



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