

German police punch, choke and kick peaceful student protesters in Berlin

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Occupiers of the Institute for Social Sciences at Berlin's Humboldt University (HU) are taken out of the building by two police officers. Activists have occupied the university in support of the Palestinians and in protest against Israel. Photo: Soeren Stache / DPA

Berlin, May 25 (RHC)-- "We are witnessing a great endangerment of academic freedom – and this has started since the beginning of Israel's war on Gaza," says Cecilia, an undergraduate student at Berlin's Free University.

After her university published what she saw as a one-sided statement of support for Israel following the Hamas attacks of October 7th, and students on campus began to experience an increase in Islamophobic harassment on campus, she and others formed a committee to show solidarity with Palestine and oppose Israel's war in Gaza.

At universities across Germany, thousands of students like her have mobilized in support of Palestine, leading demonstrations, organising lectures and sit-ins occupying university buildings and campus lawns. They have also opposed the speeches of visiting Israeli officials – notably Israeli ambassador Ron Prosor who visited Cologne University in January and the Israeli judge, Daphne Barak-Erez who spoke at Humboldt University in February.

But students and university staff also say that their right to free expression has come under assault from hostile media coverage, repressive legal measures taken by universities and politicians, and the use of police violence against peaceful demonstrators.

"Staff, teachers and students who have been trying to objectively teach and raise their voice about what is happening in Gaza and Palestine have been systematically repressed," says Cecilia.

Campus activism in Germany has stepped up in recent weeks as students, following their American counterparts, have established occupations or encampments on university grounds in Berlin, Munich, Cologne and other cities. Organisers are calling for German universities, most of which are public, to support a ceasefire in Gaza, an academic and cultural boycott of Israel, an end to the repression of student activism, as well as further acknowledgement of Germany's colonial history.

While some protests have proceeded peacefully, others have been dispersed by police, sparking public debate about whether students have exceeded the limits of protected speech and protest in Germany, or whether authorities have infringed on those same rights in order to suppress antiwar activism.

On Wednesday, students occupied the department of social sciences at Berlin's Humboldt University. They unfurled a banner designating the building the "Jabalia Institute", the name of a refugee camp in Gaza, and renamed its library after Refaat Alareer, a Palestinian poet killed by an Israeli air strike in December.

Inside, students barricaded the main entrance and spray-painted the walls with slogans including "Killing civilians is not self-defence" and "Resistance is legitimate".

"People are realising that escalation works," says Fawn, a protester who studies at Bard College Berlin. "Students are gaining confidence and experience. They'll be able to do another occupation and act more militantly."

The university's administration permitted the occupiers to stay until the following evening and engaged in negotiations with organisers in the building. But on Thursday, the university's president, Julia von Blumenthal, told journalists that Berlin's Social Democratic (SPD) senator for science, Ina Czyborra, and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) mayor Kai Wegner, had demanded that she end the discussions and order a police eviction.

Officers then evicted more than 150 people from the grounds and charged 25 with suspicion of committing criminal acts. One student occupier told Al Jazeera that police punched his head repeatedly and kicked him, sending him to hospital with a concussion. Ignacio Rosaslanda, a video journalist for the Berliner Zeitung who was covering the operation was beaten by an officer despite identifying himself, and

said he was denied access to medical treatment for several hours.

“Our universities are places of knowledge and critical discourse – and not lawless spaces for antisemites and terror sympathisers,” tweeted Wegner, shortly before the eviction began.

The occupation followed the eviction of an encampment at Berlin’s Free University on May 7, which was broken up by police after just a few hours without any attempt at dialogue, protesters say. Al Jazeera witnessed officers punching, choking and kicking peaceful protesters without provocation, while they made 79 arrests.

After more than 300 lecturers from Berlin universities signed an open letter that accused the Free University of violating its duty towards dialogue and non-violent engagement with students, the signatories were publicly condemned by federal Minister of Education and Research Bettina Stark-Watzinger of the Free Democratic Party, who called their statement “shocking” and accused them of “trivialising violence.”

Three days later, the right-wing tabloid, Bild, published the names and faces of several signatories under a headline that described them as “Täter”, the German word for “perpetrator”, which often carries an implied comparison with the Nazis.

At a government news conference convened on Tuesday to discuss the issue of student protests, Michael Wildt, a renowned Holocaust scholar whose face appeared as one of the signatories to the open letter in Bild’s story, called for a de-escalation of tensions. “Anyone who is now primarily demanding repressive measures is paving the way for an authoritarian understanding of the state,” he said.

Clemens Arzt, a professor at the Berlin School of Economics and Law, warned at the same event against restricting the right to freedom of assembly, and said that he could see no legal justification for the eviction of the Free University encampment.

Student groups such as the Jewish Student Union Germany and Fridays for Israel have for months counterprotested at antiwar events on German campuses. They say slogans used by protesters, like those calling for a “Student Intifada” are anti-Semitic and make Jews feel unsafe at universities.

Politicians from all major parties have voiced similar concerns, as has Germany’s Central Council of Jews, which represents the country’s religious congregations.

“It is not an antiwar movement ... Their hatred of Israel is obvious, they use language and symbolism that call for the murder of Jews,” the council’s president, Josef Schuster, wrote in the centrist newspaper Tagesspiegel on Thursday.

But Jews critical of Israel’s war in Gaza have been at the forefront of Germany’s student protest movement, and say they are ignored by the country’s media and their own university administrators or are themselves painted as anti-Semites.

In November, Lily, a Jewish student at Berlin’s University of the Arts (UDK), took part in a protest in which dozens of students gathered in the foyer of the university to give speeches and read the names of Palestinians who have been killed in Gaza. Participants wore black and painted their hands red.

Though the imagery of bloodied hands is widely used in many contexts to signify complicity, several German media outlets interpreted the action as a direct reference to the stabbing of two Israeli soldiers in 2000 – one of whose Palestinian killers held up his bloodied hands to press cameras – and thus a call to violence. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a leading conservative daily, reported that “Israel hate and antisemitism are running riot” at the UDK, and the university president was quoted describing the event as “violent” and “antisemitic”.

"I know that the university knew that there were Jewish students that took part in that action," Lily tells Al Jazeera. "But I think that for them was inconvenient."

She has since participated in other antiwar protests alongside Palestinian and Arab students, who she believes have been unfairly and inaccurately portrayed in the media as anti-Semitic.

"When these actions are described as anti-Semitic with broad strokes, it makes me ... feel very alienated," she said. "These have been the exact spaces that I've felt the most seen and comfortable."

The expulsion of students from university for disciplinary reasons is rare in Germany, but since the beginning of antiwar student protests last year, senior political figures have called for the measure to be used against students accused of anti-Semitism.

Such demands began to mount in February when Lahav Shapira, a Jewish Israeli student at the Free University who is active in pro-Israel groups, was assaulted and hospitalized by a fellow student at a bar in Berlin.

In March, the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-Social Democratic Party (SPD) coalition in the state of Berlin presented a new draft law to reintroduce the power of exmatriculation – expulsion – for disciplinary reasons. Introduced to push back left-wing campus radicalism in the late 1960s, when students demonstrated against the Vietnam War and the rehabilitation of Nazi officials by the West German government, the power was removed by Berlin's last ruling coalition in 2021. A temporary ban on entering university grounds is presently the harshest disciplinary measure possible.

Science senator Czyborra has said a new law, which could be introduced within weeks, is necessary and expulsion would only be used in cases of violence and as a last resort. However, the law has been opposed by several unions, student bodies and the president of Berlin's Technical University.

Critics say the new law defines violence in vague terms and is wider reaching than its predecessor and similar laws in other states. They worry it could be used to suppress traditional political activities like lecture-hall occupations, demonstrations and leafleting.

"With these laws, student activism could be in danger," Ahmed, an Iraqi student at Berlin's International University for Applied Sciences and an organiser with the Hands Off Student Rights campaign, tells Al Jazeera.

"At the moment, they will be used to repress the Palestinian solidarity movement among students. But our fear is this will go even further than that."

The law would allow for committees within the university to determine whether a student accused of a crime should be disciplined or expelled, even before a criminal conviction is decided in court.

"Universities are not a place where criminal law is or should be enforced," says Martina Regulin, chairperson of the Berlin branch of the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW), which represents 30,000 workers in the capital. She believes student protests have a healthy tradition in Germany and that this should be safeguarded.

"It's important that the victims are protected, but that's what the house rules are for and it doesn't need to involve exmatriculation," she adds.

The new law poses a particular risk to international students, who could lose their visas, accommodation and employment, all of which are tied to their enrolment at university.

Ahmed says he fears that if Berlin successfully implements the new law, other states may follow suit and use similar legislation to suppress student activism nationwide.

Addressing the encampments in Berlin, Martin Huber, the general secretary of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, which rules Germany's second most populous state, suggested last week that expulsions were a desirable solution.

"A clear position is needed by universities regarding blockades and anti-Semitic incidents," he said. "Exmatriculation must also be possible in such cases. And also the deportation of international students."

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