

5,000 protest in Berlin against EU refugee policy

By Stefan Steinberg
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Over 5,000 people marched through central Berlin on Sunday to protest against the inhumane policy of the German government and European Union towards refugees. Many of the marchers carried flowers or candles and walked behind a funeral car symbolising the massive loss of life on European borders. Handheld banners declared: “Europe’s borders kill” and “Every person is legal”.

The vast majority of those assembled were young people and students, but the march also included families and refugee organisation activists.

The original aim of the demonstration was to assemble in front of the office of the German chancellor and, in the form of coffins, confront the head of government with the results of her policy. At the last minute the police banned the demonstration from marching on the chancellor’s office and set up a no-go cordon around the building. Determined to carry out their protest, the marchers changed their route and assembled in front of the German parliament (Bundestag).

The protesters then dug symbolic graves in the turf in front of the Bundestag decked with around 100 wooden crosses to mark a small number of the thousands of victims who have already died this year attempting to enter Europe. Later on Sunday evening police intervened and detained 50 of the protesters. The following morning the grounds of the Bundestag were cleared of the crosses.

The rally was organized by a group of artists called the Center for Political Beauty, which has organised a series of campaigns in recent years directed at drawing attention to political abuses by governments and institutions such as the United Nations and the Deutsche Bank. Supporters of the group, bearing T-shirts with the slogan “The Dead Are Coming”,

formed a cortège around the funeral car which headed the demonstration through Berlin. Their aim is to put pressure on existing governments and EU institutions to implement their verbal commitment to human rights, despite the fact that these institutions are at the forefront of the attack on migrants.

The demonstration met with a broad response from layers of the population appalled at the daily reports of men, women and children dying on European borders. Some participants explained why they decided to attend the demonstration.

Sylvie is a student at the Humboldt University. She attended the demonstration with two friends. She said she had been shocked and sickened by the refugee deaths that had already taken place this year. “The actions of the German and other European governments are criminal”, Sylvie said. “Instead of welcoming immigrants with open arms the Merkel government and EU governments have set up a system aimed at deterring and punishing them.”

“25 years ago people celebrated here in Berlin when the wall came down”, she added, “but now new walls are being set up to separate people. A wall has been established around Europe to keep immigrants out and walls are being built inside Europe itself to keep people apart. Hungary plans to build a wall to keep Serbian refugees out. Greece is building barriers along its borders. This madness has to stop.”

Rolf, a refugee activist in Berlin, told WSW: “The German government tries to wash its hands of any blame and claims it takes in more refugees than other countries. But it is the German government that has played a key role in making sure that immigrants are not allowed to move into central Europe after they have attempted to land in countries on the fringe of Europe.”

“All of the parties are equally to blame”, Rolf said.

“Instead of taking responsibility for their actions and allowing people into Europe, the SPD is discussing a points system based on a Canadian model where only the best and brightest gain access to the labour market. If refugees can prove they have a master’s degree in computer science they will be allowed in. But there is no place for the rest and their families who are fleeing poverty and war.”

The response to Sunday’s protest came despite the fact that the demonstration had been called at short notice and against a background of fiercely hostile comments in the media and from leading politicians.

Activists from the group had staged funerals in Berlin last week for refugees who had died in the Mediterranean and been summarily buried in Italy. In a statement the group explained its aim: “We are commemorating all those who have died daily on the borders of Europe and are buried in unmarked graves, without their names ever reaching the public.”

The response by sections of the press was vitriolic, with articles claiming that the burials were “macabre”, “gruesome” or even “political pornography” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*). The German government commissioner for refugees, Aydan Özoguz (SPD), also criticized the march on Sunday. “With all due respect for the anger of activists in the face of thousands of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, staging a spectacle of corpses goes beyond moral limits”, he told *Die Welt* on Saturday.

Germany’s leading newspapers and politicians recently declared it was necessary to enter into a serious dialogue with the right-wing, racist Pegida movement, which vilifies and terrorises refugees. Now, just a few weeks later, the same newspapers and political parties viciously condemn those seeking to highlight the EU’s criminal role in the death of thousands of immigrants.

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