

Students Protest the School and University Reform (June 25, 2009)

Abstract

High school and university students organized a nationwide strike to protest the new reform measures at German secondary schools and universities. The government responded with efforts to “reform the reforms” in order to make them more effective in practice. Here, two journalists examine the student protestors’ main demands, offering both background information and future prognoses.

Source

Wisening Up – The Education Project

An overview of the most important criticisms of German school and university reform

Federal Education Minister Annette Schavan made an imprudent statement during a radio interview last week. The CDU politician said that the demands made by striking students were partially reactionary. She said this on a day that had witnessed the largest youth protests in years.

High school and university students took to the streets in more than eighty cities. Their complaint: politicians were demanding a radical reform of schools and universities but had refused to provide the necessary funds. Using a combination of good-humored protests, symbolic bank robberies, and nonviolent sit-ins in dean’s offices, the protestors won support for their cause. Then came Schavan’s remark, which gave the educational establishment a grumpy, know-it-all air that seemed to justify all of the prejudices against it.

The sheer scale of the protests was astonishing. After all, the generation that took to the streets is considered much less political than any before it. According to the student survey conducted by the Constance Research Group on Higher Education [*Konstanzer AG Hochschulforschung*], only 37 percent of interviewees said they were interested in politics; in 1983, the number had been 54 percent. “These are not people who go to demonstrations for fun,” said Tino Bargel, the head of the study. “That’s why society should take their demands seriously.”

High school and university students oppose the growing pressure to make the education system more efficient. They are unwilling to accept that they only have twelve years (rather than thirteen) to finish their *Abitur*, but that they still have to cover the same amount of material, which means a dramatic increase in the hours of weekly instruction. They find it unfair that supposed under-achieving students are sifted out of the system at such an early stage. As an alternative to the multi-track German school system, they present the old vision of a comprehensive school [*Gesamtschule*] for everyone. The demonstrators also believe that the recently introduced tuition fees should be abolished, and what angers them the most are the new bachelor’s and master’s programs. They are too regimented, students say, too full of rote learning and examinations. This leaves little time for scholarly reflection.

The debate on the new degrees is not without its paradoxes. After all, these degrees were supposed to eliminate the very educational injustices that the protestors so vehemently condemn. It was the old system of master’s degrees, diplomas, and state examinations that made children of civil servants four times more likely to attend university than children from working-class families. It was this old system that produced such a high percentage of university drop-outs and excessively long periods of study. “In

the real world of the university, Humboldt's educational ideal, which excites so many people, actually excluded the broad masses from higher education and strengthened the position of society's educational élites," said Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, a historian of education at Berlin's Humboldt University. The new structures were designed to make programs more manageable and to enable greater numbers of young people to pursue a degree, especially students who seek advancement through education but don't come from families with a history of academic learning. The demand to abolish this very reform is what Minister Schavan largely had in mind when she used the term "reactionary."

The reality of the reform is different, and it is this reality that the demonstrators are protesting. The following overview describes their most important demands – and the chances that they will be realized.

Goal: Away with the Bachelor's and Master's Degrees!

Background: The average period of study has definitely become shorter, and the number of drop-outs in the humanities and social sciences has decreased dramatically. Freshman classes are larger, and many professors are devoting more time to their students. But many universities have missed the chance to make a fresh start and have tried to fit old curricula into new forms. In addition, the examinations that students take each semester, which are meant to replace the inhumane final examinations, have created increased bureaucracy on an unexpected scale. The result: in some subjects, more students are dropping out than in the past and many students are groaning under the pressure. Studies show, however, that students don't have more to do than they did under the old course of study. The rigid structures rob them of their sense of self-determination and also of the joy of learning.

Prognosis: The bachelor's degree has a disastrous reputation among the public. Although it is highly unlikely that the new degrees will be abolished – this would isolate Germany internationally – efforts are already underway to reform the reform. A growing number of universities are designing bachelor's programs that last four years rather than three, and they are including time for independent study and semesters abroad. But despite all the improvements, one thing is clear: even if mistakes are made in the implementation of bachelor's programs, universities must nevertheless adapt to the challenges of a society in which not 5, but rather 40 percent of the youngsters in each grade want and should be able to study at university.

Goal: Abolish Tuition Fees!

Background: The 2005 ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court permitted Germany's federal states to charge students tuition. Universities in North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony, Hamburg, and Saarland send bills of up to 500 Euros per semester to members of their student bodies. Despite vigorous protests, Hesse introduced tuition fees but then revoked them after the 2008 elections, which brought losses for the governing CDU. The advocates of student-financed higher education emphasize that the money is urgently needed by the universities, and they hope that tuition will give students an incentive to complete their programs more quickly. Opponents criticize the deterrent effect within society, and they fear that the state will gradually withdraw from the financing of education.

Prognosis: Pressure is mounting on those federal states that charge tuition. Although tuition fees have led to improved conditions at many universities, governments have not made good on their promises to offer a state-wide scholarship system for less well-off students in order to compensate for the introduction of fees. In addition, most of the available student loans are too expensive, and the regulations on tuition exemptions are too opaque and often make no sense from a sociopolitical perspective. If decisive improvements are not made quickly, then student-financed higher education is unlikely to survive the regional elections [*Landtagswahlen*] in the next few years.

Goal: Finally Take Teaching Seriously!

Background: If the amount of funds allocated to a project is any indication of its status, then the case is clear. The federal government and the federal states provided the Excellence Initiative for Research with start-up phase funding of around 1.9 billion Euros, whereas they earmarked just 10 million Euros for the corresponding Excellence Initiative for Teaching. Nevertheless, in their Sunday addresses, the German politicians responsible for science and education take every opportunity to admonish professors and universities for not spending more time on students. In terms of structure, the new bachelor's and master's programs allot more time for teaching, student support, and examinations. But given the average ratio of 60 students per professor, frustration is foreseeable on both sides.

Prognosis: It may sound boring, but calls for more money are inevitable if better teaching is a goal. That said, there is little hope that the situation will improve. The 2020 Pact for Higher Education will channel additional billions to the universities, but only if they accept more students. The lack of funds is compounded by a systemic problem: when new professors are hired, their commitment to excellence in teaching counts less than their research work. As a result, in the past, good teachers often got stuck in mid-level staff positions, while hard-working researchers were promoted despite their poor teaching skills. This, at least, is changing: greater attention is being paid to applicants' pedagogical aptitude, and new centers for university pedagogy are supposed to train future teaching staff.

Goal: Limit the Role of Business in Education!

Background: The criticism that teaching and research are too heavily subordinated to economic concerns was sparked by various changes at German universities: by the demand articulated in the Bologna reforms that universities teach "job-qualifying" skills; by professorships sponsored by companies; and by university rankings, since these promote competition between schools. University councils that include executives from large companies alongside academics and foundation representatives are another thorn in the side of the students. These councils are responsible for advising the university administration, and they usually also have a say in appointments to university executive committees. They are part of the new administrative structures that were introduced at many universities in the past years in response to new higher education laws. On the one hand, they reduce state influence and ensure that universities have greater autonomy, for instance, in the appointment of professors. On the other hand, they give university leaders greater powers and limit the influence of traditional university bodies such as academic senates. Because of them, the new university structure has been criticized as anti-democratic.

Prognosis: There is little chance that the state parliaments will amend the new Higher Education Act. The debate on the level of influence that companies should be permitted to exercise on universities is likely to grow more intense – especially since universities will be even more dependent on new sources of revenue in the future.

Goal: We Want the Comprehensive School [*Einheitsschule*]!

Background: German children are assigned to different types of schools at a much younger age than in any other industrial country in the world except Austria. School students must decide after fourth grade – in Berlin after sixth – whether they want to go on to a university-preparatory school [*Gymnasium*], an intermediate school [*Realschule*], or a general secondary school [*Hauptschule*]. The dispute over the appropriate type of school dates back to the beginnings of the Federal Republic of Germany, when the Allies wanted the country to adopt a democratic school for everyone. Such an institution, called an *Einheitsschule* in German, did not catch on in any of the federal states. Whether integrated education systems really lead to better performance is debatable, but most scholars agree that putting students on separate tracks early on intensifies social exclusion, which is considered especially harsh in Germany.

Prognosis: Although structures did not change for decades, there have now been a number of new developments in this field. Several federal states are attempting to reduce the number of school forms. One of their focuses is to eliminate the general secondary school or to gradually integrate it with the intermediate school. Hamburg and Berlin have gone one step further. They want to combine all the school forms, with the exception of university-preparatory schools, into a new type of school. One special feature of their so-called city-district schools [*Stadtteilschule*] and regional schools is that eligible students will be able to earn their *Abitur* in thirteen years instead of twelve. Nevertheless, the type of comprehensive school that is common in most countries around the world – ending in eighth or tenth grade – is not on the educational agenda of any German federal state.

Goal: Abolish the Eight-Year Gymnasium!

Background: All the federal states in the western part of Germany have shortened their programs at university-preparatory schools [*Gymnasien*]. Saarland was the first to introduce this change: since 2001, students there have had eight years, instead of nine, to complete their *Abitur*. In the new federal states in the east, the eight-year *Gymnasium* has been the norm for quite some time. With the shortened programs, the education ministers were responding to criticism that graduates of German secondary schools were too old. This apparently put them at a labor market disadvantage vis-à-vis graduates in other countries where secondary schools last twelve years instead of thirteen. Recent figures have shown that German students complete their *Abitur* at an average age of 19.5 and that German university students take their final examinations at age twenty-seven. Politicians from all parties support efforts to bring the German system in line with European standards, but teacher associations criticized the reform from the start and parents and students joined the protest. The “turbocharged” university-preparatory schools are too demanding for students, they say, and they leave students little time for sports, music, and other recreational activities. After all, pupils still have to cover the same material and take the same number of lessons in order to do their *Abitur*. This is one reason that classes are often held in the afternoon, although most schools have not been converted to all-day facilities yet.

Prognosis: The implementation of shorter school programs is well underway. Curricula have been adapted and schedules have been revised. For most university-preparatory schools, the reform entailed enormous work, and it is unlikely that the eight-year *Gymnasium* will be reversed. At the same time, most federal states are streamlining curricula. In the long run, university-preparatory schools will have to become all-day schools. Good schools will then be able to schedule both classes and recreation throughout the day.

Shortly after the nationwide demonstrations last Wednesday, the numbers game began. The police claimed that around 100,000 people had participated, while the organizers put the figure at 240,000 and stalwartly stuck to this estimate even when it became clear just how thin the crowds were in many places. Anyone taking a closer look at these crowds made a surprising discovery: a large proportion of the demonstrators were under eighteen. In many towns they even made up the majority, and they weren’t just well-behaved school kids bringing up the rear. “Apparently, high school students are making a greater effort to engage politically, to organize, and to articulate their position,” said sociologist Tino Bargel. Many education experts are already speculating that, after a phase in which today’s student generation exhibited extremely pragmatic attitudes, the pendulum is already swinging back to a new politicization. This brings unexpected prospects for future protest waves.

But when it comes to the current student strikes, this new politicization won’t prove sustainable. The high school students are not politicized enough and the university students – long unwilling to stage protests – lack the anger and frustration that come with seeing past protests fail. That could change fast – particularly if politicians simply ignore student demands, as Schavan did when making her statement, Bargel said. “But even with the 68ers, it took five years before they rebelled.”

Source: Jan-Martin Wiarda and Martin Spiewak, “Klüger werden – Baustelle Bildung”, *Die Zeit*, no. 27, June 25, 2009.

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Recommended Citation: Students Protest the School and University Reform (June 25, 2009), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-4144>> [April 30, 2024].