

## CREATIVE, BASIC DEMOCRATIC AND PEACEFUL PROTEST IN GERMANY



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*A variety of movements are taking action in Germany, not only in the last years. In international context, Germany got famous for the peaceful revolution of 1989. Various forms of nonviolent actions and civil resistance can still be found in the united country, struggling for different political issues. The anti-nuclear movement and the movement for free education will be presented as examples in this article to illustrate how activists fight for the realisation of human rights all over the world.*

The anti-nuclear movement was founded in the 1970s to fight the use of nuclear technologies. Since that time a wide protest movement was established itself in Germany, especially in regions highly affected by nuclear power stations or radioactive waste stocks such as Wendland. Irene, an active member of an antinuclear group in Münster<sup>1</sup>, explains that the aim of the movement is the immediate nuclear phase-out and the shutdown of all nuclear plants worldwide – from the uranium mines to the reprocessing plants.

The education movement struggles for gratuitous education that is accessible to everyone and which brings forward the personality development of all students. Furthermore, active participation and self-determination in deciding on the contents and the configuration of the own education are aims of the movement, says Lukas, who has been an activist for free education since he started studying. Student protests have been part of the last decades, but especially in the last years the education protest has intensified with the so called education strike ('Bildungsstreik')<sup>2</sup> in Germany, which unites students, pupils and other actors of the education system. A common principle of most regional alliances is the basic democratic approach, which means the activists try to decide on most issues together without any structured hierarchy. The German 'Bildungsstreik' is also part of an international movement for the right of education.<sup>3</sup>

The education movement has organised huge demonstrations, rallies and protest camps for alternative education with own workshops, lectures and events. Education festivals and networking meetings are taking place and give space to different ideas and free self-organising. Moreover, streets crossings were blocked during demonstrations and lecture halls occupied. Very creative forms of protest that need to be highlighted are the different kinds of flash mobs that occurred in many cities throughout Germany. The education has been symbolically burried, street theatre performances were criticising the rigorous system, books have been hunted and colourful bicycle rallies have been blocking the streets. Different forms of art have been installed or shown in the cities. The traditional march with lanterns on St. Martin's eve for example was turned into a protest by changing song lyrics and crafting lanterns corresponding to the struggle for free education. In the small town Marburg the annual education festival ('Bildungsfest')<sup>4</sup> takes place for the 5th time this year. Lukas, one of the organisers, describes the festival as "an open space for free education. A variety of different events are part of the 3-day lasting festival, that has a different motto every year and invites everyone to contribute a workshop to the festival." Inviting international guests from Russia, Mongolia and China the education festival has also provided the framework for the simulation of climate change conferences during which partnerships for energy transition were established.

Demonstrations, vigils, sit-ins, lecture events and (international) conferences are forms of protest that are often used by anti-nuclear activists. After

1) SOFA Münster – <http://www.sofa-ms.de>.

2) Bundesweiter Bildungsstreik – <http://www.bildungsstreik.net>.

3) International Students Movement – <http://www.emancipating-education-for-all.org>.

4) Marburger Bildungsfest – <http://www.bildungsfest-marburg.de>.

© Jerome-drees.de | Thousands of students and pupils united, expressing their demands for better education at one of the Germany-wide demonstration days of the 'Bildungsstreik'.





© Robin Wood | A climbing action in front of the main station in Münster to promote the International Uranium Conference 2012.

decades of political ignorance regarding the use of nuclear power, the activists adapted other forms of protest. In the Wendland region, to which radioactive waste gets transported for over 30 years now, resistance is part of the residents' everyday life. Every year, huge camps and a variety of direct actions get organised to fight its transportation. Farmers blocked street crossings with their tractors making it impossible for police cars to pass and therefore enabling activists to remain longer on the rails. A very common kind of action within the anti-nuclear movement is climbing. To protest against nuclear transports, activists climb on trees or bridges to make the train stop by physically "hanging" in its way. Increasingly popular forms of protest are sabotage actions on the rails and chaining the own body to the tracks. For Irene it is important to be actively involved and to shape the political fields that you get in touch with. "I can't sit down and do nothing as long as I know that things need to be changed. Therefore, I often take part in demonstrations and organise a lot of actions."

Peace can be defined as 'absence of violence and war'. This is undisputable, but the definition of violence is

controversial. In the context of political protest it is useful to describe it as 'physical or psychological force against living beings' because it highlights the distinction from armed protest, which can potentially cause harm to people. In accordance with this definition the education protests are non-violent in all their activities. The anti-nuclear movement reached consensus on not harming people. Only some actions aim to damage the infrastructure of atomic trains but the activists always make sure that no passenger trains and no persons will be endangered by their actions.

Nonetheless, German political activists are facing harassment and threats. At demonstrations or political actions people get bottled up, arrested and fined afterwards. Especially police brutality is an often-occurring phenomenon, and the intensive use of pepper spray, tear gas and water cannons seems to have increased over the past years. Amnesty International alerts that the German police has problems with holding culprits within their own ranks accountable. During the education strike demonstrations, students suffered under various forms of repression by their educational institutions. These included pupils getting locked in their classrooms by headmasters, suspending students from university buildings as well as initiating criminal proceedings against them.

This happens although the movements

are fighting peacefully for human rights. The education movement postulates the right for education, which states that education should be free, gratuitous and shall enable the full development of the human personality (UDHR<sup>5</sup> art.26, CDESCR art.13). Furthermore the right to participate in cultural life (UDHR art.27) and the right to get work equally paid (UDHR art.23) are included in the struggle for free education. Human rights are important for the anti-nuclear movement as well. The German constitution guarantees the right for life and physical integrity (German constitution art.2) and activists can also rely on international human rights treaties, which entitle the right for life (UDHR art.1) and the right for physical health (CESCR art.12). They denounce the danger that nuclear plants entail for (human) beings, their health and for coming generations. Both movements fight for the realisation of human rights and as borders do not restrict human rights, the efforts of the German activists are integrated into international movements as well. Thus, political activists like Irene and Lukas in Germany can be acknowledged as human rights defenders who struggle peacefully and creatively for the realisation of human rights in Germany and around the world. ■

5) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.



© Organising team 'Bildungsfest' 2010 | Education can be multifarious: Students teach themselves how to build a raft and test it on the Lahn in Marburg.