

«Wir bleiben alle!» Refugee protests and the Right to the City in Hamburg

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While racist pogroms rage through many parts of Europe, Hamburg is experiencing the exact opposite: a broad movement for refugees' right of residence, combined with a struggle for the right to the city and the defense of a popular center for left-wing activity.

In early 2013 roughly 300 West African refugees reached the German city of Hamburg following a long journey from Libya. They had first crossed Mediterranean to the Italian island of Lampedusa – the name that the group subsequently adopted for themselves. Hoping to receive refugee status from the German state, authorities, deferring to EU guidelines, refused to provide them with any sort of accommodations and instead attempted to expel them from the city. As refugees, the Lampedusa group of course had nowhere else to go. They decided to stay and began organizing a solidarity campaign to counter the intimidation and bullying of the authorities. What no one could have predicted is the immense, spontaneous wave of sympathy and solidarity their campaign instigated.

Churches and mosques opened their doors (although the mosques were often less public about it). Squats and left-wing cultural centers made space for refugees. 80 refugees were taken in by the St. Pauli Church, next to the famous squatter village in the *Hafenstraße* and Park Fiction – an independent park (itself the result of a campaign against developers and investors) that was renamed Gezi Park Fiction last summer in solidarity with the Turkish protest movement. The park was the site of numerous welcome cook-outs organized by Hamburg locals. St. Pauli Church received daily donations of blankets and food to support the refugees. The professional soccer team FC St. Pauli donated beverages and fan apparel and gives the refugees free tickets to every home game. The trade unions *ver.di* and *GEW* organized a welcome party in their headquarters and accepted the refugees as trade union members, giving them the legal protection of the union. In one of the campaign's more unique moments, a well-known local club bouncer spent weeks guarding the church after passersby had harassed the refugees and shouted racist slurs. The refugees returned the solidarity on October 28th by playing an important role in a demonstration against rising rents organized by the local «Right to the City» coalition.

Despite the solidarity expressed by left groups, unions and sections of the general population, the Hamburg city government (led by the Social Democrats) stuck to its story: the refugees' presence in Hamburg violated European law – they must go. The movement's political momentum was accelerated in early October after a ship full of refugees sank near Lampedusa, killing 270. Solidarity from below grew, but no change was signaled from above: on the contrary, Hamburg authorities laid down an ultimatum that all refugees had to register with the police by October 11th. On the 11th, large-scale racist police checks were undertaken with the aim of registering all of the refugees in preparation for their deportation, triggering a wave of protests. That same evening over a thousand people took part in a spontaneous, loud and very angry march through the Altona neighborhood. The same happened the day after and the day after that.

Hamburg's most (in)famous left-wing autonomous center, the *Rote Flora*, hosted a general assembly to discuss how the police checks should be dealt with, culminating in another demonstration with hundreds of people. The assembly answered the government's ultimatum with an ultimatum of their own: should the government not end

the police checks within the next few days, the movement would escalate its tactics. «We will not limit ourselves to legal forms of protest while innocent people drown in the Mediterranean every day and the Hamburg Senate replies with increased pressure on refugees, despite international pressure.»

When the movement's ultimatum expired, they made good on their promise: over a thousand protestors assembled in front of the *Rote Flora* and marched through Hamburg's *Schanzenviertel* without a permit (given the German state's preference for polite, orderly political assemblies, this was quite the provocation). The march was only able to cover a few hundred meters before enduring a brutal police attack. Marchers responded by throwing rocks, bottles and fireworks. Smaller groups of protesters continued to fight with police for hours. The next day, October 16th, another 1,100 people marched from the refugees' protest camp through Hamburg's central districts. The St. Pauli football fans announced a solidarity demonstration for the following week, October 25th, which brought another 10,000 onto the streets after a soccer game, marching to the St. Pauli church. At this point the movement had reached broader dimensions, both quantitatively and qualitatively. On November 2nd 15,000 marchers came out to show their support for the refugees, and from there weekly demonstrations began to take place.

The protests draw their strength from their deep connections to Hamburg's Right to the City movement, a broad coalition fighting against the privatization and commercialization of public space and for affordable housing. Hamburg is well-known in Germany for its long history of left-wing urban struggles. In the late 1980s to early 90s, Hamburg's autonomist scene was able to squat, occupy and successfully defend rows of apartments in the *Hafenstraße*, as well as the *Rote Flora* and others, usually organized as communal apartments and living spaces. The *Rote Flora* specifically has persisted as an occupied, autonomist community center without any sort of contract or agreement with the city authorities since 1989. It has provided an important logistical and social support network for many left-wing groups and movements since then. Even when squats and occupied centers were defeated by the state, such as the eviction of the counter-cultural trailer park *Bambule* in 2002, it was never without months of sustained and sometimes highly militant demonstrations that usually dissuaded the city from further evictions.

Beginning in the late 2000s, Hamburg witnessed an explosion in rent prices. Hamburg's left formed a new «Right to the City» network to coordinate the resistance. This network has since then been successful in organizing annual demonstrations against so-called *Mietenwahnsinn* (literally «rent insanity») with thousands of participants from year to year. As soon as new investors' plans for redevelopment of Hamburg's central districts go public, protests invariably ignite: banners hang from apartment windows, houses are occupied, neighborhood meetings are held – at the moment Hamburg's activists are fighting to keep the *Esso-Häuser*, a pair of late-1950s modernist high-rises well-loved by the local population, from being demolished by their new owners. In a situation that will sound familiar to activists from other major urban centers, the protests have been unable to stop most of the redevelopment plans or prevent the rising rents, but they *have* been able to raise the political pressure significantly, such that all of the major political parties were obligated to make rising rents a central element of their electoral campaigns and promise extensive construction of new apartments in 2011. Beyond this the activists have also achieved some small victories, like in 2009 when large groups of artists occupied the *Gängeviertel*, two small alleys in Hamburg's downtown listed on historical registers. Investors had planned to demolish the streets, but the artists' occupation eventually succeeded and now the streets exist as a non-commercial, independent living

space and cultural center.

Towards the end of summer 2013 it was revealed that the *Rote Flora's* time as an autonomous space was running out: the city had already sold the building to an investor years ago, and he had decided to renovate it and turn it into a commercial music venue. Since this information went public a diverse variety of counter-protests and other activist approaches have sought to hinder the center's renovation. Given the political context in Hamburg at the moment it comes as no surprise that these activists have associated themselves with and referred to the refugees' struggle as part of their own.

At this point the Hamburg city government has allowed the refugees to erect a series of heated shipping containers on church property for them to survive the winter. However, the *actual* demand of the refugees – a collective solution to their predicament based upon their right to stay in the city – continues to be ignored. The protest movement is organized primarily by autonomists, the Left Party and some sections of the trade union movement. The concrete solidarity (food and clothing donations, social events for the refugees, etc.) has mostly been limited to the historically left-wing districts of the city such as *St. Pauli*, *Altona* and *Sternschanze*. In other parts of the city the government's position is still supported by large majorities, sometimes due to racism amongst the general population. If the movement is to force the Social Democrats (who control an absolute majority of assembly seats) to retreat from their current position it will be necessary to not only continue putting pressure on them but rather to grow and expand it, and to attract larger groups of the Green and Social Democratic milieus. This process was already begun on the November 2nd demonstration.

Since the end of December the situation continues to escalate. Supporters and activists around the *Rote Flora* issued a call for a nation-wide demonstration on December 21st with the slogan «Here to Stay: Refugees, Esso-Häuser, Rote Flora – Wir bleiben alle». Once again over 10,000 supporters turned out to march, with roughly half of them joining the autonomists' black block and thousands more in the much more colorful Right to the City block, consisting of neighborhood organizations and radical left groups not interested in the black block tactic like the Left Party. The demonstration didn't manage to get far when after just a few meters the police stopped them (despite it being a legal, police-sanctioned assembly) and unleashed wave after wave of tear gas, water cannon attacks and physical violence. The black block, as was to be expected, responded in kind with defensive violence. Thousands of participants refused to accept the state's violent and illegal attempts to do away with their right to peacefully assemble. The ensuing street battles were more intense than anything Hamburg had seen in years.

Preceding the demonstration on the 21st, a group of hooded assailants (German police code for autonomists) attacked Hamburg's most well-known police station, the *Davidwache*, with rocks. A week later, police claim, another group of 50 autonomists launched another attack on the station, injuring one police officer. This supposed attack led to a sharp campaign against «left-wing violence» and the left in general in the German media. Police capitalized on the shift in public opinion to instate what they called a *Gefahrengebiet* (literally a «danger zone» - though the Kenny Loggins reference thus far seems to be lost on the German population) covering large swaths of *Altona*, *St. Pauli* and *Schanzenviertel*. The «danger zone» stipulates that the police have the right to stop any – and everyone in the so-called zone at all times, regardless of motive, demand to see their identification and ban them from the area if the police choose to. Though this may sound like just a regular day in New York City, these kinds of police actions are very rare in Germany and pose a particular danger for the Lampedusa refugees who are all

technically in the country illegally and for obvious reasons do not wish to be registered with authorities. The Left Party, represented with eight seats in the city assembly, protested against the police's danger zone and attempted to counter the media frenzy against the movement, which in turn led the media to attack the Party as well. Just a few days later in early January it became clear that the second attack the police had used to justify their state of emergency had been entirely fictional, an invention of the police's imagination for political purposes (the police have yet to admit this, but evidence continues to mount). Since this revelation spontaneous protests numbering in the hundreds have begun popping up all over to protest the police's anti-democratic «danger zone.»

Hamburg demonstrates what is possible when the refugees' movement links with local social struggles such as those in against rising rents and privatization, particularly when these movements can grow on the basis of a strong and durable left-wing neighborhood presence like that in Hamburg and a radical left voice in parliament like that of the Left Party. Central to these developments has been Hamburg's large and healthy left-wing cultural and political milieus with their squats, cultural centers and plethora of activist groups interacting with trade unions, the Left Party and the left-liberal media. For those of us in Germany frustrated at the slow pace of political development and low level of mobilization on the radical left, we should be hopeful. Hamburg shows us that more is possible. There are many other cities with many of the ingredients that led to Hamburg's explosion.

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(Translation: Loren Balhorn)