

What's Next After Blockupy Frankfurt? Mobilizing Against Austerity in the European Union

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Catarina Principe and Anton Thun

Thousands of German activists converged on Frankfurt, one of Europe's most important financial centers on May 31 and June 1. Their slogan "Blockupy Frankfurt!" was the rallying cry for a protest of the German and European Union (EU) governments' ongoing austerity policies.

Germany is in a unique position in Europe in that the economic crisis has yet to really hit – most people still don't feel it, and public awareness of its consequences is relatively low. Statistics like 50 per cent youth unemployment are something people read about in the news about other countries. The crisis is something that we hear about taking place in Greece, Portugal or Italy, but for many Germans, it remains abstract.



Thousands of activists came to Frankfurt for a second annual Blockupy protest (Strassenstriche).

This isn't to say that German workers haven't also suffered. Austerity policies in Germany, particularly labour market liberalization and balanced budget amendments, have led to an explosion in precarious and temporary employment. But the public doesn't associate these developments with the economic crisis, and the trade unions have remained passive. Many German workers are simply relieved to have weathered the crisis and don't see much of a connection between what is happening here and what is happening in the rest of the EU. These are the conditions under which the German left is operating.

Mobilizing Against Austerity

The German left has been trying to mobilize against austerity despite this difficult political climate, starting with a major anti-austerity demonstration in 2009 under the motto "We won't pay for your crisis!" Though large, this and subsequent demonstrations were ultimately one-off events, isolated and restricted to the radical left.

It wasn't until last year that a new coalition, inspired by the enthusiasm and militancy of the Occupy movement, attempted to coalesce a broader movement against austerity. Calling itself "Blockupy," the coalition consists of both reformist and revolutionary currents – its annual protest was the biggest anti-capitalist demonstration of the year. The demonstration

seeks to build solidarity with the peoples of southern Europe and channel opposition to Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) and the ruling class she represents.

The Blockupy coalition, larger and broader than previous anti-austerity movements, sought to organize several days of action in Frankfurt, the financial center of Germany and seat of the European Central Bank (ECB). By blockading the bank on Friday, May 31, and organizing a mass international demonstration the next day, the coalition sought to carry anti-capitalism into the “belly of the beast.”

Last year, Frankfurt authorities banned all forms of protest in the city and sought to keep protesters out via coordinated road blocks and police actions. Organizers learned from this and began their preparations much earlier this year.

The actions in Frankfurt were a success. Despite pouring rain, thousands of activists began their march to the Central Bank at 5 a.m. and effectively blocked Frankfurt’s bankers from going to work that day.

After shutting down the bank, protesters streamed into the city to highlight economic exploitation and oppression in various locations. Hundreds organized a demonstration/blockade on Frankfurt’s main shopping street, denouncing the scandalous behavior of the clothing retailer Primark, which is guilty of using child labour and was one of the multinationals connected to the factory collapse in Bangladesh in April. But the protest also called attention to the degradation of workers’ rights in Germany, the downward pressure on wages, and the increase in temporary work, subcontracting companies and so-called “mini-jobs,” where workers work on a contract for as little as 10 hours a week.

The third important action was a demonstration against rising rents and gentrification in Germany’s cities. The question of housing has been a central issue, not only for migrants and local community organizations, but also for young workers and students who were clearly the main component of the Blockupy protests. Though the activists often failed to communicate what their demonstrations were about to passersby – a recurring problem for the German radical left – it was still an important experience for us in actively supporting workers and experimenting with new forms of protest.

Beyond the blockade, dozens of left groups congregated at the Blockupy protest camp, where 4,000-plus activists came together for meetings, debates, film screenings and a livestream of the democracy protests in Istanbul. Regrettably, [Die Linke](#) (the Left Party) was the only political party supporting the protests. Most of the trade unions were completely absent, as well as other large organizations of the reformist left. This meant that many of the activities of the Blockupy coalition were dominated by revolutionary and ultra-left groups, giving them a somewhat exclusive character.

Saturday’s demonstration was also a success. More than 15,000 protesters, mostly young people from a spectrum of the broad left, gathered to march to the European Central Bank. Die Linke had a large, active contingent on the demonstration, as did various autonomist groups.

The demonstration was colorful, loud and militant, and certainly one of the best in the last few years. Unfortunately, there was little presence of the organized working-class. The lack of trade union participation and the German radical left’s inexperience in communicating to working people meant that it remained by and large a protest of the organized left.

The big story of the demonstration, however, was not the protest itself, but the police reaction to it. After less than a kilometer, police blocked the march and demanded to check the identification of over 1,000 participants. A few protesters set off fireworks in protest, to which the police responded with pepper spray and swinging batons, resulting in around 300 injuries. Journalists from the mainstream media were attacked by police, and left-wing members of parliament were taken into police custody. The police did not allow the demonstration to finish and turned Frankfurt into a quasi-militarized zone for the rest of the day.

The police repression pushed the political message of Blockupy into the background, but made the movement a national focus in the following week. Dozens of solidarity demonstrations took place around the country, almost all of Germany's main political parties condemned the police action, and the mainstream media began to take notice of how intolerant of protests the German government has become. To some extent, the German public is beginning to wake up to the increasing authoritarianism that the European ruling class is employing to enforce austerity.

Lessons Learned

Though the Blockupy demonstration was smaller than last year, there are some qualitative changes worth noting.

The actions on May 31 show that the German radical left is moving away from a vague, albeit important, systemic critique of the banks and financial capital to a focus on issues, such as low wages, high rents, etc., that allow a more sustained and organized intervention.

Moreover, these actions try to connect the dots by showing that German economic policies affect not only the countries in southern Europe, but also the population in Germany – and that precarious employment, the question of housing and the crisis are not separate issues, but rather should be seen as part of a broader policy.

The second important qualitative change was the Europe-wide protests on the same day as the Blockupy demonstration (June 1st). Activist coalitions in Portugal and Spain decided to call for a decentralized European day of action under the name “People United Against the Troika” – a reference to the three institutions supervising austerity, the EU, ECB and International Monetary Fund. There were demonstrations in 12 countries and 99 cities around Europe – with a concentration in Portugal and Spain, where geographical and cultural proximity allowed for a more coordinated day of action.

It is important to note that the protests were smaller than the last austerity demonstrations, showing that the necessity of coordinated international resistance is still not clear to many activists. Nevertheless, this is the next phase of coordinated, European protests after the Europe-wide strike call last November – itself a tactical maneuver by the trade unions, brought on by pressure from the social movements.

It is crucial to integrate Germany into a coordinated European fightback. The experience of coordinated international action helps to combat the dominant ruling class arguments about the crisis – namely, that German workers are paying for the economic mistakes of the southern Europeans.

Moreover, it helps to broaden people's understanding that what is happening in each

country in Europe is not a localized experience, but a rapid and brutal neoliberal assault on labour and social rights across all of Europe – and that the economic policies that push down wages in Germany are the same ones that shut down schools in Portugal or hospitals in Greece.

So even if the European demonstrations were smaller, they were a step forward in laying the groundwork for a resistance that is not atomized and national, but international and in solidarity with the workers in all of Europe. To use an expression of Occupy, they help to build the struggles of the 99 per cent against the 1 per cent of Europe.

Next year, Frankfurt will witness the grand opening of the European Central Bank's new building. The German and European left is already planning major protests for the same day, involving a large European mobilization. This presents the opportunity to take the fight against austerity in Europe to the next level, with a genuinely international demonstration of solidarity between workers of all countries.

There remain two major obstacles to this struggle: Blockupy's inability so far to mobilize forces to the right of Die Linke and the relative passivity of the German population compared to other countries. The first task is to pressure the unions and the Social Democrats to get involved, as they are able to mobilize a much broader layer of the population than Blockupy has been able to up until now.

Expanding these networks in Germany and bridging the political divide between the German working-class and the rest of Europe will be key for building European resistance. Die Linke has played a positive and constructive role in the movement so far, but will have to do a lot more if we are going to put up a serious fight against Angela Merkel and German capital. •

Catarina Principe and Anton Thun are members of the socialist student group Die Linke.SDS and supporters of the [Marx21](#) current. This article first published on the [Socialist Worker](#) website.

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