

Germany: A balance sheet of the Social Democratic-Green education policy

Lena Sokal
27 August 2002

If one looks at the developments in the field of education under Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition government, two aspects immediately catch the eye: the increasing financial pressure and enforced cuts under which educational institutions are suffering and the continued subordination of the educational sector to the criteria of the market and profitability.

Although traditionally in Germany, responsibility for the formation of educational policies lies with the federal states and many of the concrete conditions faced by schools and institutes are the result of decisions made on a local level, it has been the federal government which has established the economic framework for the education system during the last four years. The government has also strengthened the position of those who are calling for more market economy within the educational sector. Here it bears the main responsibility for a situation which has led to a lower quality of education and aggravated access to educational institutions for the majority of the population. The general process of growing social polarization in Germany can also be witnessed within the educational sector.

The catastrophic conditions at many schools and other educational institutions in Germany are a direct result of cost-cutting measures in the social sector. On the one hand, these are a product of political calculation, but on the other hand are being forced upon authorities—especially at the local level—by a lack of money. It is the responsibility of the ministers of finance at both the federal and state level that learning and teaching in Germany now often take place under abysmal circumstances.

The financial crisis faced by many towns in Germany is a result of the fact that towns and communities have been burdened with extra costs without being supplied extra finances. This redistribution of expenditure at the expense of the communities had already begun under the previous right-wing government of Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), but now tax-reforms introduced by the SPD-Green coalition government have exacerbated the crisis, bankrupting many towns and regions within a short period of time.

While corporate taxes used to be the main source of income for many local authorities, today it is possible for big companies to legally avoid paying any tax. The financial crisis of the federal states has also intensified following the implementation of tax reforms implemented by the ministry of finance: for instance, the newly established possibility for big business to make share losses entirely tax deductible meant that the state of North-Rhine Westphalia had to pay back more than 3.2 billion German marks in taxes in 2001. According to the state Minister of Finance Peer Steinbrück (SPD), money paid back exceeded money paid in. These repayments mainly went to four

big companies: 0.7 billion euros to German Telecom, 400 million euros to energy supplier RWE, 250 million euros to the chemical giant Bayer and more than a quarter of a billion to Vodafone.

The financial crisis has led to spending cuts first and foremost in the social sector. This has led to a situation where public spending is increasingly incapable of fulfilling the needs of the education system. The effects on the educational sector are clearly visible. Many schools are ramshackle buildings using old teaching materials. Others have been simply closed down and the children are being sent to schools in other parts of town.

Not enough teachers are being employed, with disastrous results: classes are too big and are regularly cancelled, certain subjects cannot be taught because of the lack of teachers and it is virtually impossible to carry out special instruction and projects. In addition, teachers are increasingly being burdened with school managerial tasks, leaving them even less time for their excessively large classes—not to speak of being unable to provide individual attention to pupils and parents.

With communities taking less responsibility, parents are increasingly being made to pay for teaching materials and necessary renovation work is often done by parents, pupils and teachers. In order to save money, personnel such as cleaners and caretakers are frequently laid off with the result that classrooms, schoolyards and toilets are left in an unfit state.

Faced with this financial crisis, many schools are looking for other means of financing. They are turning to various companies in an attempt to win them as sponsors for certain projects and acquisitions. In some towns schools have opened up their grounds for advertisements as a means of getting money. Recently some town authorities have begun to commercialize the schools themselves—with schools being sold to private investors or rented out for a longer period, to then be rented back again by the town. Such deals are being used to quickly come up with the large amounts of money needed to finance necessary renovations to the buildings.

German universities are also being hit by savings measures, this time carried out by state governments—and therefore paralleling the fate of schools left under-funded by the communities. The universities are chronically underfinanced, resulting in badly equipped rooms urgently in need of renovation, insufficient acquisition of recent literature for the libraries, the laying off personnel and even the closure of complete departments and institutes. Even more pressure is being placed on the universities to fend for themselves and seek extra financing from the industrial sector.

The effects on free, critical and objective science and research arising from the dependence of universities on financial backing coming from big business is an aspect that is not part of the official

debate.

Alongside finance cuts indirectly forcing educational institutes to orientate themselves to the market and seek private sponsors, there has been a definite policy in recent years to open the educational sector to the market.

In 1994 the World Trade Organisation concluded the “General Agreement on Trade in Services” (GATS), regulating the free trading of services. The GATS agreement, which has been adopted by the European Union (EU), commits states to open their public service sector, including educational and health institutions, to free trading and international competition.

The agreement which establishes equal treatment for all suppliers of “educational merchandize” poses a threat to the general principle of state subsidies for educational institutes. According to GATS, the possibility to study at a state university free of cost is a “dumping offer” that disadvantages private universities. These kinds of measures are only to be permissible if private universities receive the same kind of funding as state institutions.

When it joined GATS the EU obtained a special dispensation, enabling countries to subsidise schools and universities as they see fit. But according to GATS all special regulations are only to be valid for 10 years. This means that in 2005, when the treaty is to be restructured, the EU must drop—or at least limit—its reservations.

The support of GATS by the German government is part of a policy that consciously aims to privatise the education system. Under the SPD-Green Party government, the opening of the education sector to the market has rapidly progressed and has manifested itself in different ways.

The debate calling for an end to free education at universities and the introduction of tuition fees has gained momentum since Gerhard Schröder (SPD) came to power. The majority of federal states have already introduced tuition fees in one form or another or decided to introduce fees in the near future—for long-term students, for second degree students or student fees disguised as “administrative charges”.

The coalition treaty between the SPD and the Green Party, arranged in 1998, read: “We ... exclude any raising of tuition fees”, and the minister for education, Edelgard Bulmahn (SPD), had the cheek to claim in a speech this year on June 13: “By introducing credits for education and the prohibition of tuition fees for first-time degree students we ensure that all talented young people are able to study—even if they were not born possessing a golden credit card.”

In fact, the opposite is the case. The introduction of tuition fees has only been made possible by the current government altering the laws regarding university education. Although the elevation of tuition fees is not currently possible for first-time degrees, at least if they are concluded within a bureaucratically-set time limit, it is more important to examine what the new law does not exclude. In fact, it allows for the step-by-step elevation of fees for certain groups of students.

This will not just affect a few individual students. A study by the University of Bochum has shown that 48 percent of its students belong to the group that will have to pay 650 euros per semester, because either they have exceeded the time limit for studies free of charge, are undertaking second degrees or belong to the category of senior students.

SPD politicians like the minister for cultural affairs in Rhineland-Pfalz, or his colleague Gabriele Behler from North Rhine Westphalia, are in overall charge of the debate revolving around the introduction of “education credits” or “education vouchers”, which will completely reorganise the education system. According to this system,

a young person has the right to be educated—but regulated to a certain extent by the use of vouchers. Within his or her education, the student is free to use these vouchers as he or she sees fit. But when the vouchers are spent, the student is then responsible to finance any further education.

The concept of “education credits” makes particularly clear that the ruling elite does not view education as a democratic right or a means of emancipation and information, but as a possible investment in “human capital” for those seeking to increase their individual value on the job market. Education is not seen as a task to be solved by society as a whole but as an individual problem, meaning that individuals must bear the costs.

While the representatives of official politics attempt to win support for such policies by using phrases such as “increased freedom” and “autonomy”, exactly the opposite is the case: The “freedom” to enjoy a good education and choose the content of ones studies in a manner not directly associated with future job prospects is more and more determined by social origin and status.

“Education vouchers” are also the model the World Bank is planning to use internationally to implement cuts in state education and increase privatisation and competition in the educational sector. In some countries the effects of this system have already become visible.

Under pressure of the World Bank the entire education system of Chile was adapted to the “voucher system”. The “education credits” can either be used for the state-controlled education system, or if private payment is added they can also be used for private schools. The result is that the private education sector has grown because the better-off layers are taking their children out of the state schools. The children from working class families, who have little money but often many more problems, are condemned to attend state schools which are increasingly unable to offer a decent education.

In general it can be said that an education system based on the principles of the market intensifies social inequality, because wealthy parents send their offspring to exclusive schools, to which other children have no access. Private schools, which have the ability to select their clientele, choose those children whose parents have the best means of supporting them, meaning that these children are less costly to educate.

At the other end of the social system are the schools which educate children with social and behavioural problems who need special pedagogical attention—in the main, children of working class or immigrant origin. As a result, state education institutions are increasingly being transformed into detention centres for the socially disadvantaged.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact