

# Germany: report shows Berlin sinking deeper into poverty

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On April 23, the minister for social policy in the Berlin state government, Heidi Knake-Werner (Party of Democratic Socialism—PDS), presented a 350-page study on the social situation in the German capital. This so-called “social atlas” reveals, above all else, that the population of Berlin is sinking increasingly into poverty.

The report comprises various statistical data that mainly stem from the year 2002. It looks at unemployment, social security, life expectancy, premature deaths, education and training programmes, and income, as well as demographic indicators. Using this data, a “social index” was drawn up for each municipality, which was used to highlight the differences between them.

The Berlin social atlas has already embarrassed the state government. As soon as the study was announced to the public just before Easter, the Senate had serious doubts about making its findings public. However, as the study had already been publicised, any attempt to suppress it was out of the question. Nevertheless, the authors did succeed in redrafting it in an attempt to tone down the document’s content.

The result: the majority of Berlin no longer suffers from a “decaying” social situation, but an “unfavourable” one—which is now not “worsening,” but is characterised only by “social disparities.” Unfortunately for the government, such quibbling can neither hide nor disprove the report’s concrete facts.

Two fundamental findings stand out. First, the social situation for broad layers of the population has reached disastrous proportions. Second, the social polarisation between rich and poor districts has grown enormously.

In today’s Berlin, one in six people lives in poverty. Over the last several years, poor neighbourhoods have grown in the heart of the city, in which more than half a million people eke out an existence on less than 600 euros per month.

In the district of Kreuzberg, which is shown to be the worst affected, nearly one in three people lives in poverty (28.1 percent). In comparison, the poverty rate in

Zehlendorf, which the report shows to be the most affluent of Berlin’s districts, is only 4 percent. Immigrant households are especially hard hit, with 36 percent below the poverty line, as are those without educational or occupational qualifications (42.9 and 31.4 percent, respectively). Worse still are families with three or more children, fully half of whom live in poverty (51.6 percent).

The figures for unemployment and social security beneficiaries highlight in particular the city’s social polarisation. Here again, the extreme differences are seen in Kreuzberg and Zehlendorf, whose unemployment rates are 29.9 and 10.5 percent, respectively. Likewise, the percentage of those living on social security payments is 17.3 in Kreuzberg and 2.1 in Zehlendorf. A third of the recipients in Kreuzberg are adolescents younger than 18.

A similar pattern emerges regarding occupational qualifications. In Kreuzberg, 36.6 percent of residents lack any, while in the best-qualified district, Köpenick, 13.1 percent have no qualifications. For the entire city, 21 percent of men and 24 percent of women have no occupational certification. For immigrants, the figure is 44 percent.

The life expectancy of Berliners depends on their social standing. Again, Kreuzberg tops the “worst” list, with life expectancy for men at 71.7 years and for women, 77.8. In contrast, men live on average to 77 years in Wilmersdorf (5.3 years longer) and women to 82.9 in Treptow (5.1 years more).

Of around 32,000 people who die in Berlin each year, one in four does not reach the age of 65 years. These premature deaths are also related to the poor social situation afflicting many Berlin districts. Approximately half of these premature deaths were described as “preventable and/or medically avoidable.”

The relationship between people’s health and their social conditions is shown most clearly in the case of children. The study looked at statistics from 2003 concerning the connection between social position and dental health, obesity and media-viewing habits (including television).

In the poor districts of Wedding and Kreuzberg, 35 percent

and 24 percent of children, respectively, had tooth caries that were either untreated or required tooth extraction. In the wealthier suburb of Zehlendorf, the number was only 6 percent. The figures for obesity tell a similar story: 21 percent of children in Wedding are overweight; in Kreuzberg and Neukölln, 17 percent. In Zehlendorf, 8 percent of children are overweight.

The social conditions highlighted by the Berlin social atlas are a devastating indictment of the politics of the Berlin SPD (Social Democratic Party)-PDS coalition state government, as well as of the previous SPD-CDU (Christian Democratic Union) coalition, which ruled Berlin for many years. Since the PDS joined the SPD in government in January 2002, this so-called “red-redder” Senate has not just continued the policies of the previous government, but has actually accelerated them.

The heart of their politics revolves around the uninhibited enrichment of a small elite at the top of society, while at the same time the broad majority of the population faces continued attacks and cutbacks in every sphere of life.

The exposure of the Berliner Bankgesellschaft scandal speaks volumes in this regard. The issue of dubious real estate investment funds, in which investors faced no risks whatsoever (because the bank guaranteed not only the initial principal, but also the profits from rents), opened up new investment possibilities for the bank. Through the stake held in the Berliner Bankgesellschaft by the government-owned Berlin Landesbank, this guaranteed profit was to be paid through government tax receipts, in case of an emergency.

When the entire operation collapsed three years ago, causing an enormous financial crisis for the government, the first main undertaking of the new SPD-PDS government was to pass a so-called risk-protection law to protect those who had organised and led it, as well as the investments through government tax receipts.

Since then, the massive financial crisis in the German capital has been used to ram through previously unheard-of cutbacks to social programmes and infrastructure. At the same time, the person most directly responsible for this criminal enterprise, Klaus-Rüdiger Landowsky (CDU), has been able to enjoy, up to the present day, a monthly pension of 20,000 euros, paid for by the government.

These policies are, however, not confined to the city of Berlin, but are at work throughout the country, above all in the form of the “Agenda 2010” programme of the SPD-Green government. Its taxation reforms, which mainly provide relief to large income earners, has directly resulted in billion-euro deficits in state budgets. Due to the changes in corporate taxation, Berlin alone recorded lost revenue in 2001 and 2002 to the tune of 1.8 billion euros—to which the Berlin Senate responded with drastic cuts to numerous social

programmes.

The PDS has played a particularly sinister role in this process. This party, which still maintains it is socialist, regards its role in government as selling these cutbacks to the population as “equitable” or, at the very least, “unavoidable” measures. Never in its wildest dreams did the party ever consider questioning this predatory redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, let alone repeal these measures. If one were to characterise this party in one phrase, it would be “subservience to those above them, contempt for those below.”

The spinelessness of the PDS is expressed most clearly in the person of the minister for social policy, Knake-Werner. On her passage from the SPD through the DKP (German Communist Party) to the PDS, she made many speeches denouncing social injustices. However, her political practice has spoken an entirely different language. In her ministerial capacities, she has been directly responsible for a 40 percent increase in pre-school fees, the elimination of concessions on public transport for welfare recipients, and a reduction in the nursing allowance for the blind and visually impaired by 20 and 50 percent, respectively.

By the end of the year, she further intends to discontinue special transport for the disabled. She made headlines with the idea of “profiling” 16,000 welfare recipients, in order to pressure and force them into poorly paid work.

Knake-Werner has no answer to the findings in this study, which showed the existence of an enormous region of poverty in the capital. She has no alternative for resolving the burning problems facing Berlin residents, apart from attempting to cover them up and throw sand in the eyes of the populace. In this respect, she concentrates on her core competency: to oversee social misery and suppress any popular resistance to the disastrous results of her own policies.



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