

Germany: political double talk—the PDS and the “Hartz IV” welfare reforms

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“Hartz IV must go,” declares the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) up and down the country. Wherever the party shares power, however, it is a different story. The PDS is the successor party to the Socialist Unity Party—the ruling Stalinist party of former East Germany. Last weekend, Harald Wolf, a leading member of the PDS and economics minister in the Berlin Senate, declared that he regarded much of the so-called Hartz IV reform in a positive light.

Wolf told the *Berliner Zeitung* he welcomed a number of key elements of the Hartz IV measures. The cuts contained in the so-called “Hartz IV” Act are named after the head of the commission that worked them out. Its main content is that after one year of unemployment, benefits will be cut to the paltry level of social security payments.

Wolf declared he expressly agreed with the Hartz IV principle: “Provide support and make demands.” Under this provision of the new reform, those dependent on welfare assistance will be forced to take the most menial and badly paid work. Wolf stressed in his declaration to the *Berliner Zeitung* that there was considerable demand for workers in the sphere of home and children care, as well as the environment. In practice, “environment work” involves collecting leaves and clearing rubbish in parks and public places.

What Wolf neglects to mention is that over the past years and months the coalition of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and PDS running the Senate in Berlin has been active in imposing drastic cuts in all areas relating to welfare and social policy, while at the same time pressing ahead with a programme of rigorous job-cutting. Now he proposes that public service jobs formerly carried out by those working to an agreed tariff should be replaced by a cheap wage labour force.

On hearing Wolf speak, it is difficult to decide which element is more repulsive—his overbearing cynicism or his incompetence. He embodies the type of politician who compensates for a personal lack of substance and backbone by unfailingly responding to the demands of the rich and powerful. Having faithfully taken his orders from above, he proceeds to trample on the socially disadvantaged and those below him.

Wolf likes to speak of “individual responsibility” when he refers to the unemployed and those reliant on social welfare payments. But in fact, the light-mindedness and irresponsibility with which he has condemned thousands of families to bitter poverty during the course of barely two years in office is nothing less than breathtaking. Poverty in Berlin has grown steadily during the period in office of the SPD-PDS Senate.

In February of this year, the Senate released its report on social trends in the German capital. Despite its attempt to prettify the situation, the Senate was forced to concede that currently one in six Berliners lives in poverty. Over the past few years, areas have developed in the middle of Berlin where a half a million persons are forced to live on an income of less than 600 euros per month.

According to the report, in some districts (i.e., Kreuzberg), every third inhabitant lives in poverty while more than 50 percent of families (51.6 percent) with three or more children survive under the poverty level.

At the same time, it is the economics department led by Wolf that has taken over full responsibility for the debts of the failed *Berliner Bankgesellschaft*—thereby guaranteeing fabulous profits for wealthy shareholders and speculators. His standard argument to defend his bailing out of the bank is “contractual obligations”—that

the Senate has had a longstanding contract with the Bankgesellschaft. For Wolf, contracts with banks and major concerns are “obligatory.” But he is prepared to rip up tariff and labour agreements and dispense with the basic right to work when it serves to maximise profits and help transfer the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of ordinary workers and their families.

Nevertheless, Wolf’s most recent comment over the new measures introduced by Chancellor Schröder and Labour Minister Clement (both SPD) have a positive side by making a mockery of the PDS as it attempts to win influence over protesting demonstrators by posing as an opponent of the Hartz IV legislation.

Another example of PDS doubletalk on this issue is the labour minister for the state of Mecklenburg—Vorpommern Helmut Holter—also a leading member of the PDS. As minister of labour, Holter has the job of implementing the new laws in his state and has prepared an “implementation law” to this end. Holter told a reporter from the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* newspaper: “On the one hand, I remain a determined opponent of Hartz IV, because the reform contradicts the principle of social solidarity. On the other hand, I will do everything to ensure that those affected get their money on time” (i.e., “I will implement Hartz IV faithfully down to the last comma”).

This PDS has established a reputation over past years for its hypocrisy. In its Sunday speeches, it preaches social solidarity and fairness; in practice, it carries out policies that implement and justify capitalist inequality. As a result, the party of “on the one hand, on the other hand” has long since lost any credibility.



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