

Following Senate elections

## SPD and Left Party-PDS seek to continue Berlin coalition

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14 October 2006

Last Wednesday, the leadership of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Berlin began talks with the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) aimed at establishing terms for a continuation of the coalition, which has governed in the German capital for the past five years.

Despite losing votes in absolute terms, the SPD emerged as the strongest party from the elections to the Berlin Senate held on September 17. On the other hand, its existing coalition partner, the Left Party-PDS, lost nearly half its vote compared to the previous election.

The Green Party was able to increase its vote somewhat, and came in just 0.3 percent points behind the Left Party-PDS. This meant that the SPD could either choose to form a new coalition with the Greens or continue its collaboration with the Left Party-PDS.

Both alternatives would result in coalitions with a very narrow majority of just three seats in the Berlin Senate.

The mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), who is also expected to head the incoming coalition, made clear from the beginning that the SPD was intent on “stable government at all costs.” On German television, Wowereit declared that the junior partner in a coalition can occasionally be correct on this or that issue—“but apart from that it allows the bigger party to get on with the job of governing in peace.” Both the Greens and the Left Party-PDS responded to this hint by stressing their reliability in this regard.

The Greens referred to the internal divisions inside the Left Party-PDS over the question of a continuation of their coalition with the SPD, in order to pose as the more reliable partner. At the start of exploratory discussions, the leader of the Green Party in Berlin, Volker Ratzmann, stated, “We do not have unstable cantonists.... [W]hen we decide to go into a coalition then the whole party will back us.”

For its part, the Left Party-PDS could point to five years of loyal and disciplined cooperation with the SPD during which no major differences emerged between the two coalition partners. The Left Party-PDS had unreservedly supported

the core policies of the coalition, which sought to secure the interests of a tiny wealthy elite and the consolidation of the city’s budget at the expense of the population as a whole.

Wowereit also emphasised that a major factor favouring a continuation of the former coalition was the fact that the Left Party-PDS was clear about the financial situation confronting Berlin “as opposed to any other constellation.” His remarks were clearly directed against a demand made during exploratory discussions by the Greens, calling for the money saved through budget cuts to be invested in education, energy and public transport.

The real question during the two weeks of exploratory discussions was whether the Left Party-PDS was prepared to once again take government responsibility. The party’s catastrophic result in the election was unmistakably bound up with the policies it had supported attacking social programs as part of the city government. The past five years have opened the eyes of all Berlin citizens to the discrepancy between the organisation’s left-wing talk and right-wing practice.

In this regard, the election result in Berlin expressed the historical dilemma confronting the Left Party-PDS. The party sees its role first and foremost in ensuring the stability of the existing order. Its main fear is any political radicalisation of the population, which could free itself from the control of Germany’s former workers’ organisations and question the profit system itself. To this end, the party has endeavoured to head off any large-scale opposition to official policies with left talk while spreading fresh illusions in the possibility of reforming capitalism.

However, in all those German states where the Left Party-PDS has been elected into government as a so-called “left alternative,” it has immediately sought to protect the profit system through “politics on the ground,” which are virtually indistinguishable from the policies of other right-wing bourgeois parties. Such policies have inevitably undermined the party’s attempts to maintain a “left” profile. To put it

briefly: the more political influence the Left Party wins in government, the less influence it has with the electorate.

Following its recent election defeat, therefore, the party conducted a debate as to whether it would not be better to refrain from taking part in the Berlin Senate and increase its credibility with a few years in opposition. The leadership of the Left Party-PDS in Berlin, however, including its leading election candidate, Harald Wolf, party chief Klaus Lederer, and party chair Stefan Liebich, all pleaded from the outset for a continuation of the coalition with the SPD. In order to maintain their own profile, they put forward a few vague conditions for a renewal of the coalition, but at the same time made very clear to the SPD that they were ready to cooperate.

To demonstrate its readiness to maintain its alliance with the SPD, the Left Party also moved forward a special Party Congress to discuss the issue of continued government participation. As a result, the Left Party was able to make its position clear prior to the SPD making its decision known as to its preferred coalition partner. Once again, in a determined display of discipline and solidarity, delegates at the special congress voted by a majority of 94 to 19 votes, with 6 abstentions, for the start of coalition negotiations with the SPD. Then, one day later, the SPD announced its decision favouring the Left Party as its future partner.

The SPD national leadership has also supported the decision made by the Berlin party. SPD chairman Kurt Beck called the continuation of the SPD-Left Party coalition an “intelligent decision,” while, for his part, Klaus Wowereit stressed that such a constellation had no impact for alliances struck by the SPD on a national level. At the federal level, the SPD is currently governing in a “grand coalition” with Germany’s conservative parties. “In government,” Wowereit said, “the Left Party had changed and left behind a stance of fundamental opposition.” It is precisely this change into a thoroughly reliable partner that was decisive for Wowereit’s renewed embrace of the Left Party-PDS.

The Greens were evidently very disappointed with the decision made by the Berlin SPD. Excluded from national government following the last election, the Greens lack any representation in government at the state level and had hoped that their relatively good election result in Berlin would provide the chance to take up responsibilities at that level.

The chair of the Green parliamentary fraction, Renate Künast, told the *Berliner Zeitung* that her party would not be available to “clear up the mess” should the SPD-Left Party coalition fail. “In that case there must be new elections in Berlin,” she said. And in a further significant move, the leader of the Greens in Berlin, Franziska Eichstädt Bohling, announced that following rejection by the SPD, her party

would conduct talks with the conservative Christian Democratic Union and the free-market Free Democratic Party in order to test out common ground.

The reaction of the centrist grouping Election Alternative-Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) is also significant. The national leadership of the organisation has still failed to make any official statement, but a meeting of the executive did send a letter to the regional council of the Left Party-PDS containing recommendations of minimum requirements for a continuation of the coalition. The WASG has already conducted its own debate over the rights and wrongs of government participation, in order to increase the acceptance for such a move in its own ranks following a successful unification with the Left Party-PDS.

The Berlin branch of the WASG, which stood its own candidates in the Berlin election against the express wishes of the national leadership, has strongly condemned the decision by the Left Party-PDS to maintain the coalition. WASG members in Berlin had evidently hoped that the Left Party would pull out of the coalition, allowing it to somewhat restore its credentials in opposition and therefore breathe new life into the project of a united Left Party—including the WASG. The organisation has quite correctly concluded that such a project will be stillborn under conditions in which the practical consequences of the Left Party-PDS’s right-wing policies are visible to all.

A renewed SPD-Left Party coalition in the German capital will inevitably pursue the widely despised policies that have brought about a social disaster during the past five years. It is already clear that the Left Party will rapidly drop its minimal demands on the SPD and maintain discipline in light of the narrow majority enjoyed by the coalition.

The situation has been aggravated by the fact that on October 19 the Federal Constitutional Court will make a decision in relation to the indebtedness of the German capital city. Even if the judgement should fall in favour of Berlin, the city will still be expected to adhere to a rigid budgetary discipline, which the coalition will undoubtedly interpret as “specific obligations” justifying further attacks on the living standards and working conditions of ordinary Berlin citizens.



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