

The Hesse state election:

The Left Party offers its services to the SPD

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The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has a problem in its current election campaign in the state of Hesse. Although there is widespread opposition to the anti-social policies of the ruling Christian Democratic (CDU) state government, led by Prime Minister Roland Koch, and the desire for a change of government is great, the SPD is not regarded as a genuine alternative.

This is due to the fact that the party shares power at a federal level in a “grand coalition” with the CDU, and SPD ministers in the cabinet are among the most hard line proponents of welfare cuts. On the other hand, it is well known in Hesse that Koch would have been unable to implement his reactionary policies if the SPD had put up any sort of serious opposition. On a whole number of issues there has also been a tacit coalition between the SPD and CDU on the state level in Hesse.

Under these conditions, the Left Party is being sized up by the ruling elite for an expanded role in the political landscape. While a right wing faction within the SPD rejects any co-operation with the Left Party, in light of a “strong left tendency” (according to the *Frankfurt Rundschau*) in the state, the SPD is attempting to test the waters with regard to possible collaboration with the Left Party.

This was in part what motivated the invitation given to leading candidates of the Left Party to put forward their standpoint at a meeting of the Frankfurt Press Club (FPC) on Tuesday. The FPC is a well-known association for journalists and others active in the media in the Rhine-Main area. It functions as a meeting point for politicians and the media and regularly organizes meetings and discussion on different political and cultural topics.

The meeting on Tuesday evening was chaired by Gerhard Kneier, the vice-president of the FPC and the organisation’s coordinator with the Associated Press. The main guests were Willi van Ooyen, the leading candidate of the Left Party in the state elections, and Ulrich Wilken, the party’s regional chairman. Van Ooyen stressed at the start that he was not a member of the Left Party, even if he headed its state list.

A trained electrician who now works as a teacher, Van Ooyen has been active in the trade union movement since his apprenticeship. He first joined the rail workers trade union GdED (German Rail Union), and is currently a member of the public service union, Verdi. At the same time he has been active since the 1960s in the German peace movement, social forums and various NGOs. He came to prominence as organiser of numerous Easter peace marches.

He declared that his reason for standing for the Left Party was

that the party should play the role of a “partner” for all sorts of left and extra-parliamentary organizations. The aim of entering the state parliament is to exert pressure on the other parties and appeal to their “healthy sense of social justice.”

When asked by the moderator why the Left Party had chosen a non-member to be its leading candidate, regional chairmen Wilken answered. He evidently had problems playing down the conflicts in the party over the issue of selecting a candidate. The undemocratic procedure of the party leadership has been a repeated source of dispute amongst party members.

Even prior to the founding conference of the Left Party in Hesse the federal party leadership had made their own choice for leading candidate in the Hesse state election—the former chairman of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) in the state, and long time former SPD member, Dieter Hooqe.

With the approval of party leaders, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, Hooqe was feted by the media as its leading candidate in the run-up to the party congress, but congress delegates refused to fall into line and voted down Hooqe on two occasions. In his place they elected the long time functionary of the German Communist Party (DKP), Pit Metz from Marburg.

This did not fit into the schema worked out by Lafontaine and the party leadership in Berlin. Lafontaine had broader political ambitions, which he did not want to discuss openly with Hooqe. Like the Greens, Lafontaine looked upon Hesse as a test case for later participation in the government on a federal level. For the party rank and file, however, the selection of a candidate such as Hooqe casts doubts on the very credibility of the party’s pose as a force for opposition.

Eventually the party executive committee forced Metz to “voluntarily” withdraw his candidacy. In his place the party selected van Ooyen, whose job was to smooth over the conflicts within the party. At the press club, Wilken called him a “master of integration.”

The discussion at the press club mainly revolved around the question of whether the Left Party is ready to take up government responsibility alongside the SPD. At the start of the meeting, Kneier pointed out that according to the latest opinion polls the Left Party could anticipate up to 6 percent of the vote—enough to secure the party’s entry into the Hesse state parliament. This would in turn mean that a majority for a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and Left Party would be possible.

Van Ooyen and Wilken tried to avoid giving a clear answer to

the question about government participation. They referred to the fact that the voters had not yet cast their ballots and it was still unclear whether the party would receive enough votes to warrant major changes in its political direction. At the same time, the SPD was still the bigger of the two parties and was obliged to make the first approach.

Both representatives of the Left were so defensive that the moderator finally asked whether they were not being too modest in view of the strong opposition to Prime Minister Roland Koch (CDU).

He referred to an article in the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung* from the same day with the heading "Discontent is growing." The FAZ article cited statistics that make clear that opposition to increasing social inequality is growing. When asked what they considered to be the primary tasks of the state, 74 percent responded with the demand for measures to end child poverty, 72 percent for reduced taxes for low wage earners, 69 percent for a minimum guaranteed income, and 67 percent for the abolition of all tax loopholes. The article states it is alarming that "only 15 percent of those asked thought the economic situation in the country was just."

Although both representatives of the Left Party sought to avoid giving any concrete statements about possible co-operation with the Social Democrats it became clear in the course of the meeting that they were in fact keen to move towards a coalition with the SPD. Only internal party tensions prevented them from admitting this at the current time.

Wilken explained, "If it came down to an offer of discussion with SPD leading candidate, Andrea Ypsilanti," the Left Party "would naturally accept." Efforts to unseat Koch would not be derailed by the Left Party. Van Ooyen stressed the fact that he knew Ypsilanti very well and maintains an "open relationship" with the SPD.

An editorial board member of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Ulrich Rippert, then intervened in the discussion and asked why a possible coalition of the SPD, Left Party and the Greens should be looked upon as any sort of alternative to the policies of Koch. In the past, the SPD in a coalition with the Greens at a federal level had carried out relentless attacks on social gains and the Left Party does the same in those regions where it exercises any political power.

Rippert dealt with the role of the Left Party in Berlin, where it has ruled in a coalition with the SPD for the past six years. He said: "In your Hesse election program you demand very many measures to tackle wage and welfare cuts. Why does your party do exactly the opposite of this when it is in government and shares political influence? Are you really of the opinion that a program of social reforms such as those introduced in the 1970s by former SPD leader Willy Brandt can be implemented in a situation where the globalization of production has transformed conditions today?" Addressing the representatives of the Left Party he asked: "How credible is your party?"

While the Hesse election program of the Left Party criticizes the introduction of one-Euro jobs and points out that they have led to massive cuts in the number of regular jobs, the Left Party in Berlin has repeatedly resorted to this "discriminating form of the work"

in order to replace those employed in the public services. Over 34,000 people are employed in Berlin with such jobs in so-called "work opportunities with additional expenditure remuneration."

Especially cynical is the demand by the Hesse Left Party for a shortening of working times and adherence to current contractual standards. In 2003, the Berlin senate withdrew from the local employers' association. This immediately made the contract agreement for workers employed by the state invalid. The senate extended working times for official employees from 40 to 42 hours per week and dictated wage cuts of 12 percent for state employed workers together with cuts in vacation entitlement and Christmas benefits—topped off by an extension of the working week from 38.5 to 42 hours.

While the Hesse Left Party calls for education free of charge, the Left Party in Berlin has introduced fees in schools for teaching material and slashing cuts to teaching staff. The list of social attacks by the Berlin senate could be extended at length. It reduced housing benefits for sections of the unemployed and drastically increased fees for nursery schooling. At the same time, it did all it could to satiate the demands of financial institutions in the German capital - most notably the bailing out of the bankrupt Berlin Banking Company at the expense of the tax payer and the ordinary citizens of Berlin, who were forced to foot the bill.

In the state of Mecklenburg Vorpommern, which was governed by a similar SPD-Left Party coalition until last year, the situation does not look much different. It carried out privatisation policies that outstrip anything undertaken by Roland Koch in Hesse. No other German state has denationalised so many hospitals in the past four years as Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Increased poverty in the state is reflected in the number of people on social welfare, which increased under the SPD-Left coalition by 6,000 to total 57,000.

Wilken could only reply to the issues raised with a mixture of evasions and outright lies. He explained that he had opposed the quitting of the employers' association by the Berlin senate, and then declared that the subsequent contract had brought some "improvements" for employees. In fact the contract stipulated 12 percent wage cuts together with longer working times!

It was clear from the discussion at the Frankfurt Press Club that the Left Party in Hesse is carrying out a cynical manoeuvre. While campaigning for votes with left sounding slogans, it is offering its services to the SPD as coalition partner in order to stabilize the existing bourgeois order.



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