

Germany: PSG candidate speaks at student demonstration—“Education is a fundamental right!”

Marianne Arens
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For months, the German state of Hesse has seen protests by school and university students. In the run-up to the state elections on January 27, there has been a demonstration nearly every day. Education is playing a significant role in the election, with several opinion polls making it the number-one issue.

In 1999, a severe shortage of teachers and the widespread cancelling of classes contributed to Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) winning control of the state legislature from a discredited Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the nine years that have elapsed since then, however, nothing has improved. Quite the opposite. The Koch administration has a terrible record on the issue of education.

Koch tried to overcome the chronic teacher shortage and cancelling of classes with his so-called “guaranteed teaching” model and its successor, “guaranteed teaching plus.” This involved the employment of non-teachers seeking a career change, which naturally led to a decline in the quality of teaching and professional standards.

The introduction by Koch of a 42-hour week for all public sector workers with civil service status (including teachers), meant teachers in Hesse having to work the highest number of hours since the end of World War II. This also enabled the state government to effectively cut back on hundreds of teaching posts.

According to a report by *Wirtschaftswoche*, Hesse ranked as the third-worst federal state in education each year from 2003 to 2005. The pupil-teacher ratio increased by 0.5 percent, while this average has fallen throughout the rest of Germany.

Culture Minister Karin Wolff (CDU) has threatened legal action in an attempt to silence critics of this failed education policy, who have correctly compared the use of inadequately trained staff to employing a butcher to carry out surgery.

Another measure that is causing resentment is the shortening of the length of time spent at high school. At the behest of big business, fewer staff are being employed to prepare pupils for their “Abitur” (high school diploma needed to enter university) in a shorter period of time. This is causing many pupils to suffer from stress, resulting in sleeplessness, disturbed

concentration and loss of appetite.

As for the universities, the CDU majority in the Hesse state parliament has introduced study fees of €500 a term, payable from the current winter semester. For those undertaking some courses, the fees can be increased up to €900. The introduction of such fees directly contradicts the Hesse state constitution, which says that “instruction is free” in all public universities.

The €500-per-term fee means that those from worse-off families will find their way to university blocked. Those who do not have wealthy parents will in future be forced to work in order to finance their studies.

A small section of students with particularly good results is excluded from having to pay the study fees. Kristina, a psychology student, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that even though her good marks meant she did not have to pay the fees, she rejected such a rule as being thoroughly divisive.

“Among my acquaintances, some are already being affected by it,” Kristina said. “The introduction of study fees is forcing them to work and take on several jobs. If they also have a child, if they have to look after a family, then it will be difficult to complete their studies.”

“I’m glad that I don’t have to pay study fees. But others, perhaps because of a difficult financial situation, will have to take paid work alongside their studies, and so will not be able to do as much academic work. The recent decision to introduce study fees establishes more barriers for many people who are considering studying.”

On Friday, January 18, a demonstration took place in Limburg on the slogan, “Against study fees and education cuts in Hesse.” The student organisation calling the protest produced an open letter in which they called on politicians “not to conduct their election campaign using dubious right-wing populist slogans, but to take the education debate seriously.”

The platform at the demonstration included politicians from the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens. Helmut Arens, the lead PSG candidate in the Hesse state election, was also able to address the audience.

“Education is a fundamental right!” Arens insisted. “It must be freely available for all from kindergarten to university.”

Education is not only there to benefit business, education is a democratic right; it is a precondition for real democracy.”

“The PSG is for the immediate abolition of study fees,” he continued. He explained that it was necessary to immediately pump billions of euros into the education system in order to fundamentally improve conditions at schools and universities. “Smaller classes and seminar groups should be the rule and not the exception,” he said.

Arens commented on the debate surrounding the elite Schloss Hansenberg boarding school, a prestige project of the Hesse state government. The SPD has rejected Schloss Hansenberg from the outset, saying the project uses funds that are needed elsewhere and is still threatening to close it down.

However, with a teacher-pupil ratio of one to seven, the school has proved that it is possible to motivate and interest all students in a wide range of subjects. If such means were invested in the education of all children without exception, this would undoubtedly lead to a vast improvement in the social conditions for all youth.

“Our demand is not ‘Close down Schloss Hansenberg,’ but ‘Schloss Hansenberg for all pupils!’ ” Arens said to applause.

Answering the charge that there is not enough money to pay for such “fantasies” because the state coffers are empty, Arens said, “The coffers have been consciously emptied through substantial cuts in taxes for the wealthy and big business; and this was done by those who are now lamenting that there is no money.

“This false argument could be heard not only from Koch and the CDU, but from the Greens and the SPD as well. Nine years ago, the SPD was voted out of power in Hesse because of its bankrupt education policy. They are in hock to big business just as much as the CDU.

“As for the Left Party, this organisation serves as the SPD’s stirrup-boy,” Arens said. “In the Berlin city legislature, where the Left Party has been in collation with the SPD for six years, it has supported substantial cuts in social spending, including in education; it has helped push through cutbacks in personnel in schools and universities. The reason they give is that it is not possible to avoid the ‘practical constraints’ of the capitalist system.”

“Those who want better education, must fight against militarism,” Arens concluded. “Militarism leads to welfare cuts and threatens democratic rights. Therefore, we demand the immediate withdrawal of the German Armed Forces from Afghanistan, from the Balkans, Lebanon and from Africa, the closure of all US bases in Germany and the dissolution of NATO.”

Arens’s speech as well as the PSG election manifesto, which had been widely distributed, sparked many lively discussions.

Markus, a student from Giessen, said that the funds garnered through study fees were not being used to improve conditions at university. “Fellow students who have been at the university for longer tell me that they have not seen any concrete

changes,” he said.

“Seminars are still overcrowded, rooms are too small and the heating keeps failing, all things that should not happen if you have to pay a €500 fee each term. The study fees are disproportionately high.”

Markus also expressed the hope that if the SPD took office it would cancel the study fees within 100 days, as had been promised by the party’s leading candidate, Andrea Ypsilanti.

But such a hope could soon prove an illusion. Although the states currently governed by the CDU—such as Hesse, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, the Saarland, Bavaria and Baden Württemberg—are playing a leading role in pioneering study fees, those states ruled by the SPD are also considering their introduction.

They have only held back from introducing them so far because they are desperately trying to enhance their political credibility and avoid their social base shrinking any further. In the current election campaign, the SPD is seeking to exploit the student protests to aid its own victory at the polls, and is supported in this by the Left Party and the unions.

The SPD has long abandoned any defence of the interests of working people, and is pledged to uphold the profits of big business.

The last SPD-Green Party federal government pushed through dramatic cuts in the financing of education and culture. As a result, at least 1,500 professorships were cut. The present grand coalition of the CDU and SPD has justified the introduction of study fees by citing the “necessity” for austerity measures—spending just 1 percent of Germany’s gross domestic product for the entire higher education budget.

A free and high-quality education for all requires a socialist perspective. Only if the large corporations and financial establishment are transferred to social ownership and are controlled democratically can the means be realised to transform education from a privilege of the wealthy into a fundamental democratic right for all.



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