

# Germany: PSG candidate challenges chairman of the Left Party

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*The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) is participating in the January 27 Hesse state elections with its own regional slate of two candidates. The PSG candidates are Helmut Arens, 59, a chemical worker and chairman of the Hesse regional PSG, and Achim Heppding, 53, a social insurance worker and former PSG candidate for the European parliament.*

As part of its campaign in the forthcoming Hesse state election, the Left Party held an election meeting in the city of Frankfurt-Main January 9. The main speakers were the Left Party candidate for the constituency of Frankfurt-South, Dieter Hooge, and the chairman of the party, Lothar Bisky, who had travelled from Berlin to attend the meeting.

Although the meeting was supposed to usher in the “hot phase” of the Left Party’s election campaign and had been extensively advertised via posters and newspaper ads, the organisers had only rented a small hall. The number of those attended was barely more than 100 and, as was the case with the founding conference of the party in the state some months ago, consisted predominantly of elderly trade unionists and former SPD (Social Democratic Party) and DKP (German Communist Party) members.

In his introductory speech, Dieter Hooge reviewed his 40-year trade union career in the Hesse trade union movement and made clear that he had gone through thick and thin for many decades in the SPD, before finally breaking to join the Left Party.

In his speech, Left Party chairman Bisky resorted to a string of generalities and praised the Left Party as a major political role model “for the European left and beyond.”

Following the two speakers, Helmut Arens, the Socialist Equality Party candidate in Hesse, addressed the meeting and directly challenged Bisky: “How credible is a party which carries out policies in Berlin—where it has real political influence at a regional level and is part of government—that are diametrically opposed to the demands it puts forward in its election programme in Hesse?”

Arens continued: “For my part, there remains little in the way of credibility when the Left Party in Hesse opposes one-euro jobs [low-wage jobs paid one euro per hour—US\$1.48] in its election programme here while the same party is actively involved in the introduction of 39,000 one-euro jobs in Berlin.” Arens stressed that Berlin had introduced more one-euro jobs than in any other German state, including Hesse, which has a conservative administration. The introduction of such jobs has been at the cost of workers entitled to a proper job contract and labour rights.

Arens also referred to the same glaring contradiction between left-wing rhetoric and right-wing policy in regard to other issues. “What is one to make of the fact that the government of Roland Koch [of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union] in Hesse is quite correctly criticised for breaking with organised state contract procedures to attack the jobs and working conditions of public service employees, while at the same time it was the administration in Berlin—including the Left Party—that was the first state government to withdraw from the state contract community in order to impose a 12 percent wage cut and an increase in the working week of four hours for public service workers?”

Following these comments, there were expressions of nervousness from those sitting on the podium. Arens, however, insisted on making a further remark: “In the opening remarks to this meeting, it was said that the Left Party represented the ‘only alternative’ to the established parties with regard to social policies and other political issues. I can only say that is certainly not the case! I maintain that the main aim of the Left Party is to lever the SPD back into power at the first opportunity. And the reason for this is that the Left Party has a social reformist programme, which in no way differs from the SPD. It is not prepared to challenge the base of society—i.e., capitalist relations.”

Bisky responded directly to this, defending the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party administration in Berlin. He declared that the Berlin senate could not take action against federal laws and was tied down by “specific obligations.”

Bisky argued: “The Berlin senate is powerless in the face of the anti-welfare Hartz IV laws. The senators are forced to implement what is laid down in federal legislation.” He confirmed that thousands of one-euro jobs had been introduced in Berlin—a fact about which he was “not very happy,” but then tried to put a gloss on the activities of the Berlin Left Party by claiming that there were plans to transform 10,000 of these one-euro jobs into jobs paying a gross wage of 1,300 euros. At the same time, he made no attempt to explain when such a move would be taken to introduce what are, in any case, thoroughly underpaid jobs. Bisky went so far as to claim that the jobs policy of the Left Party in Berlin was more reasonable than that of other German states.

Bisky then responded to another question from the audience that pointed out that the SPD-Left administration in Berlin had withdrawn from the state contract community in order to attack the wages and jobs of public service workers. Bisky arrogantly replied by remarking that the work of government was not just carried out

only in “sunshine” times, but also in trying times and reminded the audience that the Berlin Senate, and in particular the Left Party, had implemented all of its cuts and savings measures in close collaboration with the trade unions. Bisky declared that the city was broke and no other form of politics was possible.

Bisky conceded that the Left Party had “suffered many blows” for these policies, which had also cost the party “votes.” But there was no alternative, he asserted, and the party could not have done anything else. For Bisky, this represented a “sort of credibility” for the Left Party. In other words: for Bisky, the credibility of the Left Party consists in the fact that it did not back down in the face of widespread popular opposition, but instead stubbornly transferred the burden of the city’s financial crisis onto the backs of its inhabitants.

The truth is that shortly after assuming power in Berlin in the summer of 2001, the “red-red coalition” of SPD and Left Party, passed a law that bailed out the bankrupt Berlin Banking Society through a loan amounting to 21.6 billion euros. An additional 300 million euros were transferred on an annual basis from the state budget to reimburse the major shareholders of the bankrupt bank. Since then, the city has been put on rations in order to repay the loan.

The Senate also refused to reverse the partial privatisation of the Berlin Water Company, which had been implemented by the previous SPD-CDU Senate, although both the SPD and Left Party had declared their intention to renationalise the water supply during their 2001 election campaign. Instead, profits for the private investors (RWE and Veolia Waters) were guaranteed, with the result that water prices in Berlin rose by an average 25 percent. Further concessions to the private water companies are currently being drawn up by the Berlin Economics Senator Harald Wolf (Left Party)—once again, at the expense of the population.

In the course of the coalition’s rule, 15,000 jobs have been axed and a further 18,000 are due to go by 2012. In the first four years of the coalition, more than 500 million euros have been slashed in personnel costs.

Public services and institutions have also been drastically hit. The Senate carved out savings amounting to 50 million euros in the city’s transport system and imposed 10 percent wage cuts on transport workers in close cooperation with the public service trade union, Verdi. New employees have seen their wages cut by 15 percent.

Additional major cuts have been made in the city’s health and school systems, while the formerly state-run GSW housing corporation controlling 65,000 dwellings was sold off to the US investor and speculator Cerberus, notorious for driving up rents.

An important political lesson must be drawn from the Left Party’s election meeting in Frankfurt.

The representatives of the Left Party have no problem with the obvious contradiction between what they put forward in their political programme and their political practice. Indeed, the party is quite prepared to spring to the rescue of the SPD when necessary (see Berlin) to stabilise the situation and share in carrying out the dirty work demanded by the banks and big companies to defend their interests.

The hypocrisy and lack of credibility of the party was also

reflected in a further statement by its candidate for Frankfurt, Dieter Hoohe. He stressed that he did not want to be involved in any speculation regarding deals or pacts with other parties or the possible participation by the Left Party in a state coalition. Should such a coalition be struck at state level, it would constitute a test case for possible participation by the Left Party in a federal government.

Hoohe declared that any such decision on cooperation with other parties should be made by the members and not the party leadership. In any case, a referendum of the membership would be called before the Left Party decides on a so-called “toleration pact” or participation in a coalition.

This statement also flies in the face of reality. Hesse is a test case for what the Left Party leadership understands by party democracy and members’ rights. Left Party leaders Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi had already drawn up their own plan in the spring of last year to secure Dieter Hoohe as their leading candidate in the state election. Lafontaine was eager to use Hoohe’s extensive network of contacts in the trade unions and the SPD in Hesse in order to pave the way to enter the Hesse state parliament and—under the right conditions—establish a coalition with the SPD.

Hoohe, however, was voted down on two occasions by the party membership at a delegate conference of the Left Party. The membership opted instead for the long-time former Communist Party member Pit Metz as leading candidate. Metz had already made clear that he was opposed to any coalition with the SPD. The party leadership in Berlin then went into action to overturn this decision and force Metz into “voluntarily” withdrawing as candidate. It then came up with another candidate, Willi van Ooyen, whose job is to keep the options open for a possible coalition between the Left Party and the SPD. So much for the Left Party’s and Hoohe’s pledges of fealty to the membership!



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