

Behind the rhetoric at Wiesbaden election meeting

German Left Party seeking a deal with the SPD in Hesse

Our correspondents
16 January 2008

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.

On Sunday, January 13, Willi van Ooyen, the leading candidate of the Left Party in the upcoming election in Hesse, made unmistakably clear that the main aim of his party was to secure participation in, or at least “toleration” of, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens in the state. He made this known in a meeting of the Left Party held in the Hesse state capital of Wiesbaden. The other main speaker at the meeting was Left Party leader Gregor Gysi, head of the party’s federal parliamentary fraction, who delivered a thoroughly demagogic speech.

Van Ooyen said that the reelection of the current state prime minister, Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union), could only be prevented by voting for the Left Party. The only possibility of establishing a majority against Koch was to ensure the entry of the Left Party into the state parliament. The leading candidate explained: “Then the SPD and the Greens will be obliged keep their election promises in order to make such a coalition possible.” Only a week ago, van Ooyen had declared that the position taken by the Left Party towards an SPD-Green coalition could only be decided upon by the party’s membership.

Speaking after van Ooyen, Gregor Gysi maintained, firstly, that the Left Party put forward a left-wing

program and, secondly, that the SPD and the Greens could be pressured to the left. “Our effectiveness only comes about by changing others,” he said. “You must learn to get on the others’ nerves.” In familiar rhetorical fashion he addressed a number of pressing social ills. He pointed out that privatisation led to declining wages and rising prices, cuts to the education system resulted in social inequality, and tax gifts to the rich meant the spread of poverty for millions.

Gysi accused the SPD and the Greens of lacking credibility. Both parties were responsible for the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and the punitive Hartz IV laws, he said. While both parties now take up the theme of social justice, it was their coalition government that from 1999 to 2005 introduced huge tax cuts for the rich and super-rich. The role of the Left Party, Gysi argued, was to remind these parties of their original election campaign pledges.

Gysi’s speech was particularly demagogic because he refused to seriously address the question of the fundamental social changes that had led to the right-wing lurch of the SPD and the Greens. All this, according to Gysi, was due simply to their capitulation to the “neo-liberal spirit of the times,” and the Left Party would take a different approach.

Predictably, Gysi made no reference to the work of his own local organisation, which has been part of the administration in Berlin in alliance with the SPD for nearly seven years and which has carried out unprecedented attacks on the social rights and jobs of the capital city’s inhabitants. Even the most cursory examination of the policies implemented in Berlin serves to undermine Gysi’s speech in Wiesbaden. Berlin has been subject in recent years to a spate of

privatisations, while large-scale cuts have been made at the city's universities and nursery schools. Police powers have been intensified, tens of thousands of public service jobs have been axed and the city council has introduced 35,000 notorious one-euro-per-hour jobs. This is a balance sheet that leaves even right-winger Roland Koch in the shade.

At the end of his speech, PSG executive committee member Marius Heuser took the microphone and challenged Gysi. "I am from Berlin," he began, "and would like to make a few remarks regarding the credibility of the Left Party. It appears to me that upon taking power the role of the Left is not to pressure the SPD and the Green to the left, but it is rather the Left Party itself that moves to the right.

"In Berlin, the Left Party is responsible for a social disaster. It has carried out precisely those policies that Gregor Gysi has so verbosely attacked. Some 65,000 dwellings have been sold off to the US investor and speculator Cerberus and the city's water services have been partially denationalised. This has meant a 25 percent increase in water prices for inhabitants of Berlin. How do you explain this enormous gulf between what you say and the practice of your party in power?"

The contradiction between the left phrases put forward in the Left Party's election program in Hesse and the anti-social measures carried out by the party in Berlin is no secret, and Gysi reacted with predictable nervousness upon being confronted with these issues.

Tensions rose in the hall at the Wiesbaden meeting as Heuser spoke and Left Party members intervened on a number of occasions to ask him to bring his comments to an end. They did not want to be confronted with the situation in Berlin at their election meeting. One Left Party activist rose and explained that he regarded it an honour to be able to speak after Gregor Gysi and he was angry with the criticisms made by Heuser.

Gysi responded to the PSG criticism in a manner similar to that of Left Party Chairman Lothar Bisky a week previously, i.e., by defending the policies of the Senate in Berlin. In so doing he effectively undermined what he said in his original contribution. In view of the difficult financial situation in Berlin the Senate had carried out the only feasible policies, Gysi argued. It was necessary to make the cuts in order to improve the chances of receiving assistance at a federal level. The

fact that such a financial arrangement had been ruled out by a subsequent court decision was not the fault of the Left Party, according to Gysi.

Another member of the PSG, Marianne Arens, then addressed a further question to Gysi: "Currently train drivers in Germany are fighting against precisely the development that you criticized, i.e., that the rich are becoming wealthier at the expense of the population as a whole. However, just a few weeks ago you declared your opposition to one of the main demands of the train drivers—for an independent contract—tacitly siding with the rail union Transnet, which has functioned as a scab organisation during the dispute. Why are you siding with Transnet?"

In response, Gysi repeated the same attacks he had already made on the striking train drivers. While he did not agree with everything that Transnet says and does, he utterly supported the latter's criticism of the train drivers' demand for an "independent contract." It was necessary to maintain the uniform contract system under all circumstances.

With his remarks, Gysi again reaffirmed the close relationship between the Left Party and the German trade union bureaucracy, which also vigorously opposed the train drivers' demand for their own contract. The German trade union movement DGB fears that such a development could undermine the corporatist collaboration that currently exists between German employers and the bureaucracy. The Left Party in Hesse is dominated by such bureaucratic layers and its leading members and candidates enjoy the closest links to the local union centres.

Such layers are vehemently opposed to any radicalisation of the working class and are backing the Left Party in order to ensure that the working class does not free itself from the straitjacket of the SPD. It is no coincidence that the chairman of Transnet, Norbert Hansen, who has repeatedly spoken out against the striking train drivers, was part of a DGB delegation that participated in the founding congress of the Left Party last spring.



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