

Hesse after the election

## Germany's Left Party woos the SPD

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Scarcely three weeks after the election of its state parliament a vigorous tug of war is taking place over the formation of a government in the German state of Hesse.

On the evening of the election, both the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) ruled out a so-called grand coalition of both parties, thus making a governing majority dependent on the collaboration of at least three smaller parties. However, so far the Greens have rejected any cooperation with the CDU and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) has rejected any alliance with the SPD and the Greens. After several discussions the FDP turned down an offer by SPD leading candidate Andrea Ypsilanti for a coalition together with the Greens.

This means the Left Party, which entered the Hesse state parliament for the first time, has now moved to centre stage. A coalition of the SPD and the Greens would also be viable provided it had support from deputies of the Left Party. To this end, the Left Party has commenced an intensive campaign to woo the SPD and is offering its services to Ypsilanti, who could either govern on the basis of a minority government with the Greens—tolerated by the Left Party—or as head of a coalition with the Greens, which directly included the Left Party.

The role of cupid is being played by 64-year-old Dieter Hooge. As former chairman of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) in Hesse, Hooge is intimately acquainted with the internal workings of the SPD. He was a member of the party for 40 years, before resigning in 2004 to take part in the political preparations that eventually led to the founding of the Left Party.

Hooge was originally appointed leading candidate for the Hesse election by Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine. Hooge was turned down, however, by party delegates at a conference in Frankfurt last summer because of his bureaucratic arrogance and vehement advocacy of participation in a government with the SPD. After his rebuttal by delegates, he refused to stand as a candidate and is not a member of the party's state parliamentary group. Nevertheless he continues to play an important role, in particular to ensure that the Left Party takes every possible opportunity to cooperate with the SPD.

Last week he sent an odious open letter to his old social-democratic friend, Andrea Ypsilanti. In his missive he goes out

of his way to flatter her and ingratiate himself in the most obnoxious manner.

The letter begins with the words: "Dear Andrea, through the election you have a great opportunity of redeeming your election promises." Hesse can again become "an exemplary social reform project ... if you want." "You fought for the elements of such a reform project and received a mandate in Hesse..."

In the manner of a disappointed lover he then wails. "*I ask you: Why do you deny me...?*"

Hooge declares that Ypsilanti is well aware of the fact that although some members of the Left Party have backgrounds in the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party—West Germany) or the Stalinist organisations of former East Germany, the party in fact has nothing to do with communism. "We are not party in which so-called old-time communists dictate the line, I could easily demonstrate this, but you know it anyway yourself."

In the next paragraph Hooge then stresses the political affinities between the Left Party and the SPD: "We did not emerge on the basis of any malice towards the SPD. You know that as well as I do. The Election Alternative group (WASG) was set up in 2004 on the basis of protest against Schröder (former SPD chancellor), Steinmeier (former SPD head of chancellery), and those layers in the SPD against which you have protested at party congresses. Many of you—but not you yourself—have had to laboriously relearn how to spell social justice. The reunited left is a historical inevitability whether you admit it or not."

Two days after Hooge's love letter, a state convention of the Left Party held in Wiesbaden took the same line. The main speaker at the convention was Left Party leader Gregor Gysi.

The local newspaper, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, summarized the party congress as follows: "At earlier congresses the Left had declared itself to be very sceptical with regard to cooperation with the SPD and the Greens. After its entry into the state parliament party leaders now suggest precisely such cooperation—although disguised behind a critical tone."

Such a policy of cooperation between the Left Party and the SPD is being supported by several influential newspapers: *Die Zeit*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

They are all calling upon the SPD to junk its negative attitude and accept the Left Party into government responsibility.

After the election—and under the headline “Dare to go left!”—*Die Zeit* demanded that the SPD “finally stop demonising the Left Party in the West,” while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* asked: “Who is afraid of the red man?” and then quoted the political expert Josef Esser: “These are all respectable and committed people ... they could just as well be in the SPD.”

Later the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* submitted the Left Party to a “practical test,” in order to counter some critical voices from business circles. The article fulsomely praised the policies carried out by the Left Party in its role as the SPD’s coalition partner in the German capital of Berlin. The paper writes that the Left Party had co-governed in Berlin for nearly seven years, has filled the post of economics senator, and introduced admirable policies for the city.

The article continues by noting that the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, forerunner of the Left Party) had deliberately sought to take over the economics post during the formation of a coalition with the SPD in 2001, in order to prove its “political capabilities”—a task achieved by economics senator Gregor Gysi with bravura. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* fulminates: “With a mixture of eloquence, commitment and not least with his wittiness, Gysi managed to overcome reservations on the part of the business community against the PDS.”

In fact, it was not Gysi’s affability which won over big business, but rather the unparalleled welfare cuts implemented by the Senate at the expense of its own voters. Similar policies carried out by a conservative CDU-led Senate would have inevitably led to massive resistance. As a result of the Senate’s policies unemployment and poverty have increased dramatically in Berlin, while public service workers have suffered a 12 percent cut in income combined with longer working hours.

Then, at the end of January, *Die Zeit* remarked on the “social-democratic dilemma” and declared that the SPD found itself in a “strategic trap” and could only free itself “by opening itself up to the Left.” A “red-red-green government” could “emerge as the only opportunity for Ypsilanti to become prime minister,” the paper wrote.

At the end of the long article, which weighs up all the doubts, the author comes to the point: “What basis is there, however, to prevent the Left from being put to a real practical test of its politics in the West? Either it develops into a reliable political force—as did the Greens and the PDS in the East—then it could become a durable partner for the SPD. Or the problem of a ‘left protest party’ takes care of itself automatically within fewer years.”

This campaign to integrate the Left Party into the Hesse state government has nothing to do with sympathy for left-wing policies. Instead the proposal is to use the Left Party to contain and control growing popular opposition. In this respect, it is useful to briefly review the experience with the former SPD-

Green government (1998-2005).

When the SPD (then led by Oskar Lafontaine) and the Greens won the election in 1998 and replaced the 16-year-old conservative government led by Helmut Kohl, many spoke of a new beginning and hoped for left-wing policies. In fact the SPD-Green government implemented policies that led to a massive intensification of poverty and attacks on working conditions—policies the Kohl government had been unable to push through.

The Greens were consciously brought into government 10 years ago because the existing parties were too discredited to impose such attacks. The former pacifists played a key role in pushing through welfare cuts as well as paving the way for German participation in the war against Yugoslavia—the prelude to the worldwide deployments of the German army as part of a new imperialist foreign policy.

Today, the Greens are also discredited, and popular opposition is growing. Under these conditions, the Left Party is now being groomed to head off such opposition and play a leading role as an important prop of the bourgeois order. In the state of Hesse, where Green leader Joschka Fischer first won his spurs, the deputies of the Left Party are to be integrated into government—either directly or indirectly.

The working class must take heed. A coalition of the SPD and Left Party in Hesse would not represent a step forward. In an alliance with the Left Party and Greens, Ypsilanti would base her policies on the demands made by the banks and big business federations in the same manner as the coalition in Berlin. The social and political offensive against the working class would be continued, creating conditions whereby increasing disillusionment on the part of the electorate could easily be exploited by right-wing demagogues.



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