

Germany: What lies behind the attempts to ostracise the Left Party?

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A sharp controversy has developed regarding how Germany's established parties should deal with the Left Party, which won sufficient votes last week to enter the Hamburg state legislature. With its new presence in the Hamburg legislature, the Left Party now has representation in 10 of Germany's 16 state parliaments.

It is not only the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) that have responded in knee-jerk fashion, resorting to the crudest forms of anti-communism. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) is in the throes of a fierce dispute on the question of the Left Party that threatens to tear the party apart.

The controversy began following the Hesse state election five weeks ago. On the eve of the poll, it was clear that the incumbent state premier, Roland Koch (CDU), had not succeeded in mobilising support with his racist campaign based on claims of a growing number of "foreign criminals," and he lost the election.

There were insufficient votes to form a majority centre-right coalition consisting of the CDU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Since the SPD and the Greens also failed to secure a majority, Koch could be removed as state premier only with the support of the Left Party.

Some media commentators have since called on the SPD to drop its hostility to the Left Party and agree to form a coalition government in Hesse, as the Social Democrats had done in Berlin some years back. The pro-SPD news weekly *Die Zeit* ran the headline "Dare to Go Left!" The newspaper called on the SPD to stop "demonising the Left Party in the west" of Germany. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* said of the Left Party: "They are all honourable and dedicated people.... [T]hey could easily be in the SPD."

Two weeks later, just before the Hamburg vote, SPD leader Kurt Beck suggested the party's lead candidate in Hesse, Andrea Ypsilanti, might possibly allow herself be elected state premier with the votes of the Left Party. There then ensued a hue and cry from the CDU and the CSU and in the right-wing media, accusing Beck and Ypsilanti of breaking their word and lying, since before the election they had spoken out against any cooperation with the Left Party.

Immediately after the Hamburg poll, the SPD right wing raised its voice, criticising "Beck's left turn" and launching an aggressive counter-offensive.

Following the Hamburg election, the SPD and the Greens offered to help the CDU secure a majority. They are determined to keep CDU Mayor Ole von Beust in power, even though he lost the election and no longer has a majority.

Von Beust originally came to power with the support of the extreme right-wing Schill Party, launching harsh cuts in social spending and attacking democratic rights. The SPD and the Greens have justified

their overtures towards the CDU by declaring that they could not contemplate cooperation with the Left Party.

On election night, former Hamburg mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi (SPD) stressed that there could be no question of "cooperation with the Left Party, however it was arranged." Speaking on German television, Dohnanyi said, "There can be no serious collaboration with a party that rejects the free market foundations of society."

Two days later, he added fuel to the fire in the tabloid *Bild*. Dohnanyi told the newspaper that the SPD should make it clear the Left Party had such an "absurd programme," one could not form a coalition with it. He declared, "The SPD cannot do anything together with the Left Party!"

He added that the SPD's lead candidate in Hesse, Ypsilanti, should not allow herself to be elected as state premier with the votes of the Left Party "under any circumstances."

Federal Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) struck a similar tone, saying the SPD should not govern in Hesse with the support of the Left Party. "To suggest otherwise," he said, "would be to jeopardise the credibility of the entire SPD." Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) also lined up against party chief Beck.

On the Monday following the Hamburg election, the SPD executive committee supported Kurt Beck's position almost unanimously, giving Ypsilanti the green light to form an administration supported by the Left Party. But just hours later, executive committee members said they did not feel bound by this resolution, saying party leader Beck, who had been unable to attend the meeting due to illness, would have faced fierce criticism if he had been present.

The right-wing "Seeheim Circle" within the SPD called on Beck to immediately withdraw the resolution on relations with the Left Party. The spokesman of this group, Johannes Kahrs, told *Bild*, "I consider Monday's executive committee resolution to be wrong. I also do not believe that one can sit out the protest. We demand that Beck overturn the resolution regarding cooperation with the Left Party in the west German states."

Even long-time SPD cadre who have been in political retirement for years, such as former defence minister Hans Apel, suddenly raised their heads and spoke out. Apel declared, "Mr. Beck has deceived the voters, and done so deliberately. The Hamburg SPD will not tolerate that! Otherwise, I would have to consider whether it is still my party."

By Thursday, the Hamburg SPD had intensified its attack on Beck. *Stern* magazine reported a three-page letter to Beck from the SPD's lead candidate in Hamburg, Michael Naumann. According to *Stern*, Naumann wrote that the SPD leader had been "driving the wrong way up the road," costing the SPD at least 3 percent of the vote in Hamburg.

What is behind these hysterical attacks from the SPD right wing?

The SPD's traditional anti-communism does not provide a sufficient explanation, since many of the SPD right-wingers have no reservations about maintaining contact with old-time Stalinists. Moreover, Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine is one of their own, like most of the Left Party's functionaries in the west.

In 2004, Klaus von Dohnanyi was the representative sent by the SPD-Green Party government headed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to set up special economic zones in eastern Germany, where he worked closely in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with Employment Minister Helmut Holter, at the time a member of the Party of Democratic Socialism and today a member of the Left Party. Dohnanyi believes that it would have been far better after the fall of the Berlin Wall to have brought the middle- and lower-ranking Stalinist cadres, who now form the backbone of the Left Party in the east, into the SPD.

There must therefore be other reasons for the exclusion of the Left Party. The main motivation is to declare illegitimate any party that raises social questions and speaks about social inequality, however superficially.

The right-wing SPD leaders know only too well that in all those regions where the Left Party participates in government, it does exactly the opposite of what it promises in its election campaigns. But simply the fact that in its election propaganda the party declares its opposition to the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and calls for the Hartz welfare "reforms" to be rescinded is enough to brand it as a politically unacceptable.

The blow is aimed at the Left Party, but the real target is those who voted for the party. In the eyes of the SPD right-wing, the fact that tens of thousands have voted for this party is of no relevance. Under no circumstances should mounting social resistance find any expression in official politics.

It is no coincidence that the Hamburg SPD is spearheading these attacks. For decades, the SPD has been dominated by right-wingers closely connected to the bourgeoisie in this Hanseatic port. Trade brought great wealth to the old merchant families, shipping companies and Hamburg's well-to-do. The city, which boasts several media barons, is home to more than 5,000 millionaires. Arrogance and class snobbery have long been a hallmark of political life in Hamburg.

At the beginning of the 1970s, when then-SPD leader Willy Brandt was unable to hold back the working class, which had mobilised in significant industrial struggles to win double-digit wage increases, Helmut Schmidt rallied his Hanseatic power base to take over the chancellorship and beat back the workers' wage offensive.

The situation today is much more advanced. After seven years of an SPD-Green Party federal government, and barely three years of a grand coalition (CDU-CSU-SPD), social divisions have assumed extreme forms. According to official statistics, the purchasing power of those earning the lowest wages sank, on average, 13 percent over the past 15 years.

People who have paid into the social insurance system for many decades lose their benefits after just one or two years' unemployment, and are forced to accept low-wage jobs or live on minimal welfare handouts. The impoverishment at the lower end of society stands in reverse proportion to the unrestrained enrichment at the top. This is why demands for a legal minimum wage and an increase in the highest tax rates find growing popular support.

While Klaus von Dohnanyi insists that the economic reforms introduced by Chancellor Schröder should be continued without any

amelioration, in order to make Germany competitive, the bad news for German workers is piling up: the closure of the Nokia factory in Bochum, mass redundancies at Siemens, BMW, Henkel, and so on.

In view of increasing social tensions, the SPD right-wing seeks to prevent any discussion on social inequality and suppress any criticism of capitalist society. Hence its attacks on the Left Party. Behind the façade and urbanity of Hamburg's champagne socialists lies a clear message: The hoi polloi should keep their traps shut!

On the other hand, party chief Beck, Andrea Ypsilanti and others in the SPD leadership believe one can best continue with Agenda 2010 by integrating the Left Party into government on a regional level, as Holger Börner once did with the Greens in Hesse, and as demonstrated by Klaus Wowereit today in Berlin.

For its part, the Left Party has reacted to the right-wing campaign by doing everything it can to prove its loyalty and reliability to the state.

Top party officials use every opportunity to stress how close they are to the SPD—that, although they think capitalist society can be improved, they unreservedly recognise existing property relations. They point to their government work in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania to prove that they can push through welfare "reforms," one-euro jobs and other unpopular measures more affectively than other parties.

Instead of opposing the insolent attacks from the SPD, the Left Party is reacting like a whipped dog and moving even further to the right. Following the howls from the SPD, the Left Party is responding with its own disciplinary measures.

The affair surrounding the DKP (Deutsche Kommunistische Partei—German Communist Party) member Christel Wegner is characteristic. Wegner was elected to the state parliament in Lower Saxony on the Left Party slate. She gave a press interview after the election in which she seemed to defend the Stasi secret police in the former East Germany, saying, "if one establishes another form of society" one needs "such an organ...because one must guard against the fact that reactionary forces could exploit the situation and undermine the state from within."

Hardly had Wegner spoken when an outcry was heard from the media. The news was spread that a Left Party deputy was demanding the re-establishment of the Stasi and the rebuilding of the Berlin Wall, although this was not what Wegner said. The Left Party executive responded by immediately dissociating itself from Wegner, and two days later she was expelled from the party's state parliamentary faction.



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