Germany: Roland Koch remains prime minister in Hesse

How the SPD right wing overturned an unwanted election result

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Despite his devastating electoral defeat on January 27, Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) will remain prime minister of the state of Hesse. The leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Andrea Ypsilanti, has announced she will not stand against Koch at the first session of the new state parliament on April 5. According to the state constitution, Koch can therefore remain indefinitely in office, although he lacks a parliamentary majority.

Koch owes the unexpected extension of his term of office to a right-wing gang inside the SPD, which prefers to support a CDU government rather than give any ground to growing social opposition. Backed by a massive campaign involving the CDU, the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the media, the right wing in the SPD, and in particular the Seeheim Circle, has prevented Ypsilanti being nominated Hesse prime minister with the support of the Greens and the Left Party.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding: the Socialist Equality Party supports neither a SPD-Green minority government in Hesse, nor a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party. We stood our own candidates in the Hesse election precisely to warn of the dangers of such a government. Such coalitions would subordinate themselves to the dictate of the banks and big business and undertake measures directed against the interests of its own electorate in a similar manner to that of the Koch government. This has already been demonstrated by seven years of an SPD-Green Party government at a federal level, and six years of an SPD-Left Party coalition in the country's capital city, Berlin.

The issue here, however, is not the right-wing politics of the SPD and the Left Party, but respect for a democratic decision of the electorate. The result of the Hesse state election was an overwhelming rejection of the Koch government—its education policies, which introduced tuition fees and massively cut funding to normal schools in favour of elite schools; its social policies, which have widened the social divide; its environmental policy, which allows the continued operation of antiquated nuclear reactors in centres of dense population; and Koch's despicable attempt to win the election based on a law-and-order campaign aimed against foreign workers and their families.

The election result amounted to an earthquake. The difference between the CDU and the SPD was reduced from 20 to zero percent, the Left Party entered the state parliament for the first time, winning 5 percent of the vote, and the CDU lost its majority and even failed to win enough votes to form a government with its preferred partner, the FDP. Taken together the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, which share similar views with regard to central issues of state policy, clearly have a majority.

Initially some of the more liberal newspapers, such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*, argued in favour of integrating the Left Party into government. They assumed that the social opposition expressed in the election result could best be brought under control by the inclusion of the Left Party. In articles they made reference to the experiences in the states of Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where the Left Party and its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism, repeatedly broke election promises and supported massive budget cuts at the expense of the interests of its own electorate.

But then the wind changed. When it became clear that Ypsilanti was planning to be elected prime minister with the support of votes from the Left Party and form a minority government with the Greens, the SPD right wing moved into action to initiate a huge campaign which found broad support in the media. When, shortly before the Hamburg state election, SPD Chairman Kurt Beck finally gave Ypsilanti a green light for cooperation with the Left Party, this campaign was ratcheted up enormously.

For days the media and television talk shows expressed their indignation over the "broken promise" by Beck and Ypsilanti, who prior to the Hesse election had spoken out against cooperation with the Left Party. Anticommunist veterans of the Cold War were wrenched out of retirement and dragged before microphones and cameras to express their horror at the prospect of cooperation with the "communists." SPD leader Beck, who retired to bed with flu and disappeared from public view for two weeks, was widely criticised for his weak leadership and loss of credibility.

Eventually, a newly-elected SPD deputy cropped up in Hesse who was ready to boycott Ypsilanti's election as prime minister. Dagmar Metzger, a 49-year-old commercial lawyer, had gone on a ski vacation after the election and had not turned up for the crucial meeting of the SPD fraction which decided on Ypsilanti's candidature. From her holiday home in Switzerland, Metzger declared that Ypsilanti could not count on her vote if she allowed herself to be voted into office with the help of the Left Party. For Metzger such a step went against her "conscience."

After futile attempts to persuade Metzger to retract her position, Ypsilanti finally announced last Friday that she would renounce her candidature. When the Hesse SPD made clear that it was not happy with Ypsilanti's concession and put further pressure on Metzger to back down, the SPD leadership in Berlin put its foot down and declared that there was no parliamentary basis for a government led by Ypsilanti. SPD General Secretary Hubertus Heil went on German television to announce: "Therefore Mr. Koch will remain in office as acting prime minister for the time being."

The campaign against any cooperation with the Left Party is only indirectly aimed at the party. Barely anybody in SPD or the CDU has any doubts that they can rely on the Left Party when it assumes government responsibility. The SPD knows this from many years of collaboration with the Left Party in Saxonia-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin, while the CDU cooperates with the party in many east German municipalities.

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One can only understand the vehemence of the campaign against integrating the Left Party into the Hesse government when one takes into account the increasing social tensions in Germany and the present strike movement of public service workers. The biggest strike wave for many years is an expression of broad opposition to a social development that has led to huge levels of increased income and profits for company executives and share holders, while millions are threatened with poverty and levels of social insecurity, including substantial sections of the traditional middle class. The trade unions are currently experiencing enormous difficulties in restraining the expectations of those on strike.

Under these circumstances any cooperation with the Left Party would, according to the right wing, send a wrong signal and awaken hopes that the Left Party, despite its best efforts, would not be able to restrain. According to the right wing in the SPD, it is preferable to set an example from the start and make clear that they will not be deterred from their course by an election result.

In its attacks on the Left Party, the Seeheim Circle — an organisation of the SPD right wing — has made abundantly clear that it considers any criticism of capitalism as inadmissible. A statement from the group castigating Beck for deviating from the position of "No co-operation with the Left Party" declares: "In many states of the Federal Republic the Left Party stands for a policy of populism and denial of reality. It defends a form of politics which tells people that globalisation is just an evil trick by greedier 'big capitalists,' which can be reversed by a few changes in the law. The Left encourages envy and mobilizes blind, destructive rage without offering any sustainable polices." The statement concludes by reminding the SPD that it is "not a left of centre party, but rather a centre party, which extends into the left spectrum."

At issue is national policy, not just the situation in Hesse. These forces are intent on ensuring that the Agenda 2010 program of welfare cuts introduced by the former SPD-Green government led by Gerhard Schröder continues to be implemented—irrespective of the result of the next federal election. Due to the current level of division within the ruling grand coalition (SPD-CDU-Christian Social Union) it is quite possible that such elections will take place before the appointed date of 2009.

In 2005 the SPD under Gerhard Schröder had already dissolved parliament and made way for a right-wing coalition rather than make any concessions to its unpopular Agenda 2010 policy. When against expectation the CDU and FDP failed to gain a majority in the election the SPD, acting as junior partner, hoisted the CDU into the post of chancellor.

The Seeheim Circle has never forgiven Kurt Beck for attempting to stem the loss of support for the SPD by making a few insignificant, purely symbolic revisions to the Agenda 2010. It was in the course of this conflict that the right-wing Vice Chancellor and Labour Minister Franz Müntefering resigned from office. Beck, who governed for many years in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in a coalition with the FDP, is anything but a leftist. Nevertheless, some of the Seeheim group have made no secret of their intention of exploiting the crisis in Hesse to prevent Beck from standing as the party's next candidate for chancellor.

As SPD Bundestag Deputy Gerd Andres told the *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*: "I expect SPD boss Kurt Beck to take personal responsibility for the confused situation in which the SPD finds itself. In my opinion his candidacy for the chancellorship is ended, because he is unable to overcome his credibility crisis."

Alternatives to Kurt Beck currently being considered include German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier or Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück. Both men are apparatchiks with close links to former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who are largely indifferent to pressure from the party base. Steinmeier has never run in a popular election and Steinbrück only once—in 2005 for prime minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. He lost the vote.

The Seeheim Circle has been largely responsible for organising the campaign against any cooperation with the Left Party in Hesse. Dagmar Metzger, who is now regularly presented in the media as a "courageous woman" motivated more by election promises than the promise of power, has in fact close relations with the SPD right wing. As a SPD member in former East Berlin, her father vigorously opposed the merger of the SPD and KPD after the Second World War to form the Socialist Unity Party (SED); and her father-in-law, the former mayor of Darmstadt and parliamentary deputy Günther Metzger, was the founder of the "Metzger Circle," the forerunner of the Seeheim Circle.

It is therefore very unlikely that Metzger was merely acting alone and relying on her "conscience." Instead, this "conscience" seems to have been pre-programmed by the Seeheim Circle. Metzger apparently has no problems with her "conscience" when it comes to securing a longer term in office for the right-winger Koch, despite the fact that she and the SPD owe their success in the election largely to the widespread opposition to Koch. The media has nothing to say about such a "broken promise."

It remains to be seen how long Koch can remain in office as acting prime minister. Lacking a parliamentary majority he is unable to appoint new ministers or implement a budget policy. However, the stage has been set for the emergence of new coalitions, which could also serve as a model at a federal level.

Koch has sought to woo the Greens to enter into a three-party coalition with the CDU and the FDP. He has also indicated that he could resign in favour of another member of the CDU, who is more acceptable to the Greens. One possible candidate is Petra Roth, the mayor of Frankfurt, who governs the banking metropolis quite smoothly in a coalition with the Greens.

In Hamburg, where the CDU also suffered high losses and where the Left Party was also able to enter the state parliament, the Greens are avidly intent on forming a coalition with the CDU to form the first CDU-Green coalition in Germany at the state level. Although this means that the Greens must "break" virtually all of their election promises, the media has seen no obligation to comment. Should Hesse also decide on a coalition involving cooperation between the CDU and the Greens this would serve as a role model for a future government at a federal level.

FDP leader Guido Westerwelle, who has so far fixed his eyes firmly on an alliance with the CDU, reacted to the closing of ranks between the CDU and the Greens by indicating that in future he could anticipate a three-party coalition together with the SPD and the Greens.

All of these manoeuvres and speculations about coalitions have one thing in common—they take place behind the backs of the electorate. The first priority of all the parties is to ensure continuity with regard to the interests of big business in the form established by Agenda 2010. To this end the Left Party could still be needed in future, and one of the aims of the present campaign in Hesse is to bring the Left Party into line. Predictably, the Left Party has reacted to the conflict in Hesse and the tirade of abuse it has received from the right wing by untiringly reiterating its loyalty to the state and its readiness to support the SPD without conditions.

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