

# Germany: SPD state minister berates welfare recipients

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Thilo Sarrazin, the Social Democratic finance minister in the Berlin city legislature, has made a name for himself by ruthlessly cutting budgets. He has carried out the most ruthless attacks on the poorest social layers. But now even he has outdone himself.

On February 10, a Berlin newspaper published a three-day food plan devised by Sarrazin, which he claimed proved that the meagre €4.25 daily food allowance, paid as part of the “Hartz IV” welfare benefits, was more than sufficient. In meticulous detail, Sarrazin lists how it is possible to survive on just €3.76, “eating healthy, nourishing” meals. The finance minister (whose monthly salary is €11,500) offered suggestions based on his own practical experiences—all in all “good news”, according to Sarrazin.

According to Sarrazin’s menu, one of the three daily meals for a single person household consists of a bratwurst (38 cents), 150 grams of sauerkraut (12 cents) and reconstituted mashed potatoes (25 cents), together with seasoning and oil (20 cents). Breakfast is two bread rolls with 25g jam, 20g butter, a slice of cheese and an apple.

Following Sarrazin’s menu would mean spending even less than the present €128 monthly allowance for food, paid as part of the €347 welfare benefit. This is assuming that it is always possible to purchase at the cheapest discount available.

If one follows these outrageous instructions—even ignoring the long-term health consequences—the menu is clearly life-threatening. The menu provides approximately 1,550 calories a day. According to the German Society for Nutrition, however, a minimum of 3,000 calories is required for someone engaged in light physical exertion. The alternative proposed by Sarrazin would lead to serious consequences within four weeks. On the basis of his prescribed daily amount of fluids

(0.75 litre), the diet could produce symptoms of deficiency even sooner.

Sarrazin’s effort to undercut the already low level of welfare benefits by concentrating exclusively on nutrition sends out an unmistakable message. The finance minister reduces human needs in a developed society to the most elemental question of food intake, and makes pure survival the yardstick of social welfare.

All those who are unable to provide “healthy nourishing meals” out of their welfare payments should have it drummed into them that they only have themselves to blame, according to Sarrazin’s logic. They are probably not able to manage their own household properly. In short: what they lack is discipline. Sarrazin’s words repeat one of the core arguments of rightwing ideology.

To enjoy a banana instead of an apple, a schnitzel instead of a bratwurst, fresh potatoes instead of reconstituted mashed potatoes and broccoli instead of sauerkraut, possibly to eat some smoked ham or drink a glass of wine in the evening—all this, according to Sarrazin, is an impermissible luxury for the 600,000 dependent on welfare in the German capital.

In his arrogance, Sarrazin goes so far as claim that is “completely wrong” to “artificially” place those dependent on welfare “below the poverty limit”. The Social Democrat thereby places a question mark over the *relative poverty limit* as defined by the European Union. According to this standard measure of poverty, a person is considered poor if he or she receives less than 60 percent of the average wage. This value is presently set at €9,370 per person per year—in other words, somewhat less than the salary the Berlin finance minister draws each month.

Although this definition of relative poverty may ensure physical survival, it is far below what is

necessary as a socio-cultural minimum. At this level of income, there can be no talk of being a full participant in social life. But this is something Sarrazin clearly thinks is unnecessary.

He not only rejects all criticism, but in answering his critics has gone even further. On one television programme he stated, “If one considers it, the least problem facing welfare recipients is being underweight.”

It is not the poor who are to blame for the fact they have difficulty getting enough to eat. It is the SPD-Left Party coalition in the Berlin city legislature, which has created the basis for mass poverty, condemning them to poor nourishment. With 335,000 households dependent on welfare, Berlin has the highest percentage of welfare recipients in the country.

No other city in Germany has nearly so many “one-euro jobs” as Berlin, where 39,000 are forced to work for just one euro more than they would receive on welfare. The extensive introduction of such low wage labour undermines full time work and pushes wages downward. Berlin was the first place in Germany to withdraw from the state government employers association in order to cut salaries in the public sector by around 12 percent while simultaneously increasing the working week to 42 hours.

In certain respects, Berlin thus boasts an unparalleled degree of state-ordered poverty. But Sarrazin makes the poor themselves responsible for their precarious situation and draws a picture of an over-weight, anti-social underclass which fritters its money on superfluous luxury items, cannot act responsibly and whose unhealthy way of life places a burden on the health system.

The fact that Sarrazin’s utterances are generally accepted in official politics is also shown by the half-hearted response of mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD). Pointing to Sarrazin’s own income, he called these “single menu suggestions” superfluous, but in earlier comments had completely supported Sarrazin’s line.

In his autobiography, published last September, Wowereit asks, in relation to the Hartz IV welfare reforms, whether “what we sometimes call poverty doesn’t really also have a little to do with a lost ability to be more disciplined and to keep a mathematically correct household budget”. He links the deficiencies suffered by welfare recipients directly with expenditure

on alcohol, lottery tickets, mobile phones, pay-TV (such “luxury goods” are clearly not something the socially deprived should expect), etc.

Sarrazin can behave so provocatively because he knows the entire Berlin city legislature stands behind him. The Berlin social affairs minister Heidi Knake-Werner (Left Party) and the Left Party’s federal social affairs spokeswoman Katja Kipping expressed their indignation. But what is the value of criticism that hides behind coalition discipline? While Sarrazin determines where the cuts will fall, Knake-Werner has for years converted these cuts into reality. Hence nobody in the Left Party raised any demands for Sarrazin’s resignation or questioned the continuation of the coalition with the SPD.

If one looks beyond the verbal criticisms of the Berlin Left Party and examines its concrete actions, then it is clear that it loyally participates in implementing all the cuts dictated by its joint government programme. Although this stands diametrically opposed to the official policies of the Left Party, it justifies them on the basis of “practical constraints” and “existing federal laws”.

In reality, the disdain for the poor so openly displayed by Sarrazin is what lies behind the social cuts by the Berlin government. The argument that it is “external practical constraints”, an excuse so favoured by the Left Party to justify social cuts, is utter deception. The Left Party’s reaction to Sarrazin’s utterances—howls of complaint that promise nothing concrete—has completely exposed the organisation’s excuses—according to which nothing can be done against the cuts due to practical constraints and federal law. The Left Party’s silence on Sarrazin reveals its true role as an organisation that actively contributes to supplying the necessary ideological apparatus for the implementation of such policies.



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