

German state of Hesse abolishes student fees

Anna Rombach and, Helmut Arens
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On June 17 the state parliament of Hesse decided to abolish student fees—a measure which had been introduced one and a half years ago. Certainly many students will be pleased with the decision, which enables them to study free of charge. At the same time, any jubilation on their part may well be short-lived. Students should place no trust in any of the parties represented in the Hesse state parliament in Wiesbaden.

None of these parties has a principled position for the defence of the interests of students and the working population as a whole, despite the new “law to ensure equal opportunity at Hessian universities” passed by the state parliament majority, consisting of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party.

The state parliament had already passed a motion reversing the introduction of student fees on June 3. The state SPD and Greens, with the support of the Left Party, passed the motion with a slim one-vote majority. The original law to enforce study fees of 500 euro per term had been introduced by the former state government—a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the free market Free Democratic Party—in 2006, in the face of fierce opposition by students.

However, the June 3 draft law to reverse student fees was incorrectly formulated and the state’s acting Prime Minister Roland Koch (CDU) refused to sign the measure two days later because of this formal error. Koch accused the SPD and Greens of incompetence on the basis of their inability to formulate a law correctly.

Koch received backing on June 11 from the Hesse High Court, which declared in support of student fees even though the constitution of the state guarantees education free of charge. In a move that was clearly politically inspired, the court threw out an appeal signed by 70,000 inhabitants of the state. The decision means that student fees could be reintroduced at any time.

Finances to cover the costs of abolishing fees are ensured in the state budget only to the end of 2008. Since none of the parties is prepared to increase taxes on big business, it is clear that the working population will have to make up the costs for the new measure while universities will also suffer from declining state financing.

The Hesse SPD chairmen and leader of the state opposition, Andrea Ypsilanti, declared that the abolition of student fees meant that socially deprived layers would no longer be denied access to the state’s universities. For the Left Party, Janine Wissler declared that the measure could be a signal for the abolition of student fees in other German states. In fact, nothing could be further from reality.

The comprehensive restructuring of the universities is in full

swing. Across Europe public educational facilities are being converted into privately owned and funded service enterprises. Privileged elite universities, so called “educational beacons” are being created while state run universities are being transformed into quasi-private sponsored institutions such as the Goethe University in Frankfurt, dependent on funding from private and business sources.

This process was set into motion by the former federal government, the SPD-Green Party coalition led by Gerhard Schröder. It is supported by all of the parties involved in the current grand coalition government and the European Union.

Education is being transformed into a commodity with research and education adapted to the needs of the German and European business community. The ruling elites are exerting enormous pressure on the universities to breed an academic elite that can serve to advance competitiveness on the global market.

The universal introduction of student fees is one glaring expression of this development, but it is not the only one. Waves of spending cuts—leading to the mass processing of students at state universities forced to race through their standardized bachelor training courses—increasingly makes independent, critical study a thing of the past.

In order to ensure free, high-quality education with equal opportunities for all up to university level, it is necessary to liberate the education system from the grasp of business interests and structure education in the interests of the working population—a perspective which is vehemently opposed by the SPD, the Greens and the Left party.

There is no doubt that Roland Koch is a cynical representative of the extreme right of the German political establishment. His behaviour in the state parliament—including insults directed at his political opponents—makes a mockery of the most elementary democratic principles. He is only able to succeed, however, because of the role played by the SPD.

Andrea Ypsilanti was able to achieve a narrow majority in the state parliament on the basis of a broad movement to the left in the state electorate. In the state election campaign earlier this year, voters clearly rejected the racist campaign against young foreigners launched by Koch. They also expressed their discontent with the anti-social policies of his coalition. In the course of the election campaign, the SPD was able to wipe out a twenty percent deficit in the polls and rival the CDU in the vote. The Left Party obtained 5.1 percent.

However, instead of utilising this electoral base, Ypsilanti declined to stand as candidate for the post of Prime Minister, allowing Roland Koch to remain in office as acting Prime Minister

despite his drubbing at the polls on January 27.

Ypsilanti's decision came on the heels of a vicious and reactionary campaign by political and media circles, which had the full support of the right wing in the SPD, directed against cooperation between the SPD with the Left Party. Leading national SPD politicians, such as Wolfgang Clement and Klaus von Dohnanyi, conducted public polemics against Ypsilanti, while the right wing in the Hessen SPD organised in the "Networker" group of the "Seeheim Circle" campaigned behind her back. SPD state deputy Dagmar Metzger, who refused to support Ypsilanti because she feared the latter would cooperate with the Left Party, was merely a pawn in the manoeuvres of these rightwing in the SPD.

Ypsilanti's most prominent rival inside the SPD, parliamentary group deputy Jürgen Walter, recently called for a coalition with the CDU "with our eyes open".

Andrea Ypsilanti does not embody any sort of left or progressive tendency in the SPD. Her politics are based on the attempt to direct broad public discontent and the desire for change into the channels of official bourgeois politics. In order to restore some credibility in the SPD, Ypsilanti ran an election campaign based on criticising some aspects of the anti-welfare Hartz IV and Agenda 2010 programs, which had been originally introduced by the SPD-Green federal coalition. At the same time she sought to undermine support for the Left Party and prevent it from entering the state parliament.

The promise by the SPD to abolish student fees has to be seen in this light. It is a tactical manoeuvre aimed at heading off the broad discontent with education politics that has resulted in a wave of unrest in universities across the state.

At the same time, Ypsilanti has made no appeal to the students and workers who supported her in the election against Koch. She is utterly opposed to any popular mobilisation against the consequences of policies that her own party introduced. All that is left is the war of words between Koch's transitional government and the majority in the state parliament. This effectively disenfranchises the population as a political factor.

In fact the only one to profit from the situation is Roland Koch. According to opinion polls, fresh elections would result in a majority for the CDU and FDP.

Koch is hoping to play for time and delay new elections until next summer to coincide with planned European elections. In the meantime his acting government is repeatedly refusing to enact resolutions passed by the majority in the state parliament.

In April the Hesse Interior Minister Volker Bouffier (CDU), a close confidante of Koch, refused to enact a halt to the deportation of refugees from Afghanistan, a measure that had been passed by the state parliament. On the homepage of the state CDU, two party representatives Peter Beuth and Holger Bellino, argue that such deportations are politically necessary, because young Afghan men have a responsibility to help re-construct their country—in particular because the Hessen police is also active in such reconstruction.

The SPD spokesman for domestic affairs, Günter Rudolph, called Bouffier's refusal an inappropriate party-political "test of strength", while the head of the Left Party in the state parliament, van Ooyen, declared that Bouffier's decision represented an

"affront to the entire state parliament". However, the CDU is able to justify its stand by pointing out that there is no ban on deportations in other German states where the SPD is in power.

Progressive asylum politics have no support in the SPD, and so at the start of the legislative period the Hessen SPD made a retreat and dropped the issue.

Another explosive issue is the refusal by Koch and Bouffier to rejoin the local employers' state contract community (TDL) despite a vote in favour by the state parliament in May. The state government refuses to enact the resolution arguing it would allegedly cost hundreds of millions of euros. Predictably Andrea Ypsilanti grumbled over what she called an "enormous snub for parliament and all those employed in Hessen" and a "political scandal".

The same issue is due to come up again as part of budget consultations at the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009. It is another potential factor that could precipitate the dissolution of the state parliament and new elections.

The Left Party in Hesse openly took up the issue of the TDL agreement to declare its solidarity with the SPD and the Greens. Together with both parties it sought an appropriate means of ensuring that Koch could not "repeatedly snub" the state parliament.

At the same time it deliberately remains silent on the role of its sister organisation in Berlin. As part of a state coalition with the SPD in the German capital, the Left Party supported the withdrawal of Berlin from the local employers' TDL. The Senate in Berlin deliberately took this step in order to be able to implement drastic savings in the city's public services.

In the short period of time in which it has sat in the Hessen state parliament, the Left Party has made no secret of its political orientation to the SPD and Greens. It has dropped any independent profile in favour of the role of loyal junior partner to the SPD.

The Left Party is not an alternative, but rather pursues the goal of resurrecting reformist illusions in the SPD. The desolate condition of the SPD is a direct expression of the fact that it is no longer possible, in times of globalisation and international financial and economic crises, to reconcile a policy of reformist concessions to the working population with the defence of the capitalist order.

The objective unity of the international working class is the basis for an independent, international party of the working class, which must break with the reformist politics of the SPD and the Left Party. The Socialist Equality Party, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fought for this perspective when it stood for elections in Hesse in January.



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