

Germany: Left Party issues blank cheque to SPD in Hesse

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The recent Left Party state convention in Hesse has overwhelmingly supported the election of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) regional chair Andrea Ypsilanti as state premier to lead a minority government coalition with the Green Party.

Only 2 of the 183 delegates at the convention held last weekend opposed the motion put forward by the party's regional council, which stated, "The Left Party wants to enable a change of government; therefore, we will vote for Andrea Ypsilanti as state premier."

The Left Party placed no conditions on its support for the SPD; the resolution to support a "red-green" coalition in Hesse amounts to a blank cheque. The long list of 31 proposals, with which the Left Party campaigned during the state elections in January, has shrunk to just three points, which federal party leader Oskar Lafontaine outlined in his address to the convention: No further reductions in public service personnel, no cuts in social spending and no further privatisations.

What should really be made of these "demands," however, was made clear in Lafontaine's remark that "we look to see what is possible." And what is possible, according to Lafontaine, will be determined by the shape of the state budget. Lafontaine said all demands would have to take into account "what is possible within the framework of the present Hesse budget." The Social Democrats have always justified their attacks on social gains by reference to such "practical constraints."

The state convention marked a further clear move to the right by the Left Party, which was established only one year ago.

Following the convention, anyone who believed this party represented an alternative to the SPD should now know better. The grandiose words of the party officials—that the Left Party would push the SPD to the left—vanished into thin air at the convention.

It is not the Left Party that is placing conditions on the SPD and driving it forwards, but vice versa. In order to accept its support, the SPD is demanding the Left Party

make an unqualified acknowledgment of the free-market economy and capitalist conditions. Before Ypsilanti meets officially on September 9 with the new Left Party regional council and its six-strong state parliamentary group, the SPD state council is to publish a "catalogue of conditions" to which the Left Party must then agree. "We want clear statements supporting the secret service and a clear commitment to the democratic system," said Carmen Everts, the Hesse spokeswoman of the so-called "networkers" in the SPD.

At its state convention, the Left Party made clear that it is ready to swallow anything in order to support a change of government in Hesse. The energetic assistance of the party executive in Berlin and its chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, ensured all obstacles were removed to cooperation with Ypsilanti and the SPD in Hesse. The delegates spared no efforts in order to present the Left Party as a responsible and reliable supporter of the new government.

In his speech, Lafontaine made clear that the Left Party is nothing more than a means of maintaining social democracy. He repeatedly stressed agreement with the programme of Ypsilanti and the SPD in Hesse. Like the SPD, the Left Party, too, wants community schools, said Lafontaine. In view of rising energy prices, social tariffs should be introduced. He would very much welcome it if Ypsilanti rejected cuts in welfare and the dismantling of jobs in the public service. The Left Party also was in favour of improving people's living conditions. His party, as well as the SPD, could contribute to all this, "whether it was called a coalition, or something else," he said.

Many of the journalists covering the convention reported the "remarkably sweet nature" of the delegates. *Spiegel-on-line* described it with the words: "They were very well behaved in the debates, elected the pragmatist Ulrich Wilken as regional chair and rejected all motions that opposed support for an SPD-Green Party minority government."

Not one of the delegates dared to mention the "Berlin conditions." For nearly seven years, the Left Party (and its

predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism) has been in coalition with the SPD in the Berlin state legislature. During this time, it has been responsible for more social cuts than many conservative-led state governments; the redistribution of wealth from those at the bottom to those at the top of society accomplished by the “red-red” city legislature has even shocked many Left Party supporters in Berlin. They are responsible for job cuts and lowering wages in the public service, raising the costs of the social infrastructure such as schools and child care, selling off public property to private investors and speculators, and much more.

The fact that no one at the Hesse state convention even mentioned what the Left Party has done in Berlin says much about the opportunist views of these time-served ex-Social Democrats, ex-Stalinists, ex-Maoists and ex-radicals. They do not dare look reality in the face and are unable to draw any political lessons from the experiences of the past.

A typical representative of these clapped-out lefts is 64-year-old Manfred Coppik, who was elected to the Left Party regional council. Until 1982, Coppik was an SPD deputy in the Bundestag (federal parliament). He resigned when his party colleague Karl-Heinz Hansen was expelled for criticism of NATO’s deployment of US cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles in West Germany. Afterwards, they both established the “Democratic Socialists” (DS) and tried to influence the SPD “from the left,” an effort that was doomed to failure. Subsequently, they stood as candidates on the “peace list,” which was heavily influenced by the Communist Party. When that failed, Coppik became active in the Greens, finally joining the Party of Democratic Socialism in 1990.

Coppik and all the other delegates who can look back on similar careers have never drawn any serious conclusions from their previous political shipwrecks. Ten years ago, the same people enthusiastically supported the SPD-Green Party federal government as a turn to the left. What came of this is well known. Under the auspices of its Agenda 2010 programme of social cuts and labour reforms, the government of Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer carried out the harshest attacks on the welfare state ever seen in Germany. It was this government that revived German militarism and sent German armed forces into war against Serbia and to Afghanistan.

After this experience with the SPD-Green Party federal government and the SPD-Left Party state legislature in Berlin, anyone who thinks that an Ypsilanti-led state government in Hesse would represent progress and a turn to the left is either a conscious political charlatan or extraordinarily naïve.

Even if Andrea Ypsilanti and some sections of the Hesse SPD have spoken out against a few of the excesses of the

welfare reforms in order to impress some voters, they continue to defend the socio-political line of the SPD. As leading officials of a party that has implemented welfare cuts for a decade, they cannot avoid their own responsibility for these policies.

Since the Left Party functions so obviously as the stirrup boys of the SPD, some functionaries fear the party could use up its political credibility all too quickly. This fear lay behind the conflicts that did emerge at the convention. The aggressive candidacy of the pragmatist Ulrich Wilken succeeded in winning the state chair position against Wolfgang Hareter, who says the membership should be asked before taking any decision to support an SPD-Green coalition in Hesse. He is, however, far from being an opponent of the right-wing course that the party leadership is pursuing, only warning, “If we do not involve the membership, it will lead to a bad outcome.”

The state convention confirmed the prognosis made by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) at the beginning of the year, during the Hesse state elections. We wrote at the time that the Left Party in Hesse was playing a cynical double game. “While it tries to win votes by uttering left-wing slogans, it is simultaneously offering itself to the SPD as a coalition partner in order to safeguard bourgeois conditions.”

A simple glance at Italy makes clear the dangers for the working class posed by the politics of the Left Party. For many years in Italy, the Left Party’s sister organisation Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) supported the centre-left government of Romano Prodi in the name of the fight against Berlusconi, finally participating directly in the government. It was responsible for systematically disarming the working class politically and carrying out attacks on pensions and other social rights, as well as supporting Italy’s participation in the Afghanistan war. This smoothed the way for a new version of the ultra-right Berlusconi government and lost it all support in the working class, to such an extent that it is no longer even represented in parliament.



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