

Germany: Left Party supports austerity measures in Hesse

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Last week, the Left Party regional executive in Hesse agreed a 10-point paper outlining its collaboration with the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party. In the paper, the Left Party affirms its readiness to support an SPD-Green Party minority administration in the state capital, Wiesbaden, until 2013.

The paper, which was unanimously agreed, centres on the determination of the Left Party to vote for a state budget proposed by the SPD-Green Party coalition, as well as support for the incoming government's legislative programme. In addition, the Left Party has signalled that it will not seek to influence the individual composition of the government. The party also promises to vote for the election of SPD regional chair Andrea Ypsilanti as state premier and expresses its confidence in her cabinet.

The Left Party has dropped its demand for a consultative role in the Upper House of the Bundestag (federal parliament), comprised of representatives of Germany's 16 state parliaments, submitting to the SPD diktat that decisions over the casting of Hesse's votes in this chamber are the exclusive preserve of the state government.

The 10-point paper was then agreed by a meeting of the state Left Party membership at the weekend. The paper calls for the creation of 25,000 jobs in Hesse, as well as the development of schools with smaller classes. It calls for a general ban on night flights at Frankfurt airport and for the Ypsilanti government to sign up to the contract covering public sector pay and conditions.

All these demands and proposals for social improvements are just window dressing. They serve only to obscure the fact that the Left Party is offering a political blank cheque to a future SPD-Green Party minority government in Hesse.

The true character of an Ypsilanti government was revealed last week, when it became clear that the outgoing Christian Democratic government of Roland Koch was

leaving its successor a budget deficit running into the billions of euros. The parliamentary director of the Greens, Frank Kaufmann, and the financial spokesman of the SPD parliamentary group, Reinhard Kahl, estimate that the budgetary deficit amounts to more than €1.5 billion.

This does not, moreover, factor in the consequences for Hesse of the international financial crisis, which is developing into an international recession. The decline in production in important branches of industry, such as in chemicals, and the closure of whole factories in the automobile industry are having an adverse impact on tax receipts at both the state and municipal levels.

"Hesse does not have any more reserves and therefore faces the full effects of the financial crisis on tax receipts," Kaufmann and Kahl said.

Kahl, who is tipped to become finance minister in an Ypsilanti government, and his Green Party colleague have said there can be no guarantees regarding future expenditure and nothing is excluded--not drastic austerity measures, nor cuts in jobs or social spending. It is "too early" to speculate what might or might not be taboo, they explained.

Under these conditions, the self-declared goal of an Ypsilanti government to balance the state budget by 2013 can only mean draconian cuts in all spheres.

Although acting finance minister Karlheinz Weimar (Christian Democratic Party, CDU) is legally obligated to present a draft budget for 2009, he has stopped working on it and has instructed his undersecretary to brief the SPD and the Greens on the precarious budgetary situation.

In this way, the CDU is trying to drive a wedge between the SPD and the Greens, on the one side, and the Left Party on the other. Knowing that an incoming SPD-Green government is committed to implement strict budgetary measures, the CDU hopes that the Left Party would not be prepared to support the social attacks this would imply.

However, such considerations underestimate the readiness of the Left Party for compromise, which is ready to support an SPD-Green Party state legislature under all circumstances--and whatever this may entail. The Left Party is determined not to miss the opportunity in Hesse to present itself as a "responsible party of state" that is not afraid of cutting social spending.

It is becoming clear that the Left Party will soon play a key role in Hesse in the implementation of drastic austerity measures against the resistance of the general population, just as it has done in the Berlin Senate (city government), where it is in coalition with the SPD.

For years, the previous CDU-led Senate in the German capital was a byword for corruption and waste. Then the Left Party came to power in alliance with the SPD, organizing one social cut after another in order to shift the burden of the crisis and the budget deficit onto the backs of the population.

This has been the case for nearly seven years. The SPD-Left Party Senate has carried through more social cuts than many conservative state governments. The redistribution of wealth from those at the bottom to those at the top has developed to a tremendous extent. The SPD and the Left Party are responsible for cutting jobs and lowering wages in the public sector, for raising the costs of the social infrastructure, such as schools and childcare, and for selling off public property to private investors and speculators.

The Left Party has already made it very clear that it will behave no differently in Hesse than in Berlin, and will carry through cuts in social spending in the name of reorganizing the state finances. At its congress in August, party leader Oskar Lafontaine provided the appropriate watchwords when he said that all reforms would be subject to the financial constraints of the state budget.

Although no formal coalition agreement between the SPD and the Greens has yet been presented, the Left Party are signalling their support for such a government, which could then take over the state legislature in Wiesbaden with the election of Ypsilanti as state premier with the votes of the Left Party at the end of November.

The Left Party is missing no opportunity to demonstrate its political subservience and "readiness to govern." Its acquiescence in face of the attacks by right-wing CDU, SPD and Free Democratic Party (FDP) deputies in the Hesse state parliament knows no bounds.

Here are just a few examples: When Left Party delegates set up a wooden hut in the Kelsterbach forest to protest against the extension of Frankfurt airport, the

FDP, with the support of the CDU, presented a motion saying that the Left Party was "the first parliamentary grouping to abandon the fundamental constitutional political consensus to uphold the law." The Left Party parliamentary grouping immediately indicated its readiness to demolish the hut, if called for by the city administration in Kelsterbach.

In September, the CDU tabled a motion stating that no Hesse state parliament deputy could belong to the "German Peace Society--United Conscientious Objectors" (DFG-VK). This was justified with reference to a poster that could be found for five years on the homepage of the DFG-VK web site and that allegedly mocks fallen soldiers of the German Armed Forces. The motion was directed against Left Party parliamentary leader Willi van Ooyen, who has been a leading member of the DFG-VK and is himself a conscientious objector.

A typical scene was when van Ooyen gave vent to his anger and countered with a remark about the "trigger happy" CDU in Hesse, describing politicians who supported Germany's international combat missions as "backroom culprits"--not an inappropriate remark in view of the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan.

Representatives of all parties then expressed their indignation: The meeting was interrupted; the Council of Elders immediately condemned van Ooyen and issued him with a reprimand.

But for some right-wing and anticommunist politicians from the CDU and SPD, this was not enough. CDU parliamentary group leader Christean Wagner spoke about "systematic and telling offences." He said it showed the true political colours of the Left Party, whose leader was an "anti-constitutional, left-wing extremist." SPD deputy Dagmar Metzger said, "One holds one's breath when van Ooyen steps up to speak," and claimed that the Left Party had once again shown it was not fit for government.

Van Ooyen apologized unreservedly and withdrew his remarks, and even his own parliamentary faction dissociated itself from his choice of words.



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