

Lessons from Hesse: The Left Party and the debacle of the SPD

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For years, the Left Party and its leaders Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi have asserted that a policy in the interests of the working population can be achieved in cooperation with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). This is the quintessence of the party's perspective. The entire programme of the Left Party is aimed at breaking the influence of big business groups over the Social Democratic Party and persuading the SPD to implement social improvements.

In Berlin, the results of this programme can be seen in practice. In the German capital, the Left Party has ruled in coalition with the SPD for the past seven years. The policies of the Berlin Senate, however, are determined not by the promises made by the Left Party, but rather by the strict austerity course laid down by Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD). The Left Party supports this austerity course and seeks to cover up for it with all manner of leftist clichés. As a consequence, the city has suffered an unprecedented decline in public services, a decay of its schools, universities and hospitals, and a growth of poverty.

The recent events in Hesse have once again confirmed that the perspective of the Left Party leads to a dead end.

The party wanted to repeat the Berlin experiment in Hesse, without, however, going so far as to directly enter the state government. The party was prepared to elect the state's SPD leader Andrea Ypsilanti as prime minister, support an SPD-Green minority government and vote for its state budget. It issued Ypsilanti a blank cheque, although it was already clear that the policies of the SPD-Green government would be determined by the state's huge budget gap of €1.5 billion.

Now, the whole plan has blown up in the Left Party's face before it could come into effect. Last Monday, and just one day before the planned election of Ypsilanti,

the right wing inside the SPD pulled the emergency brake. Four SPD deputies with close links to business circles stabbed their own party in the back and withdrew their support for Ypsilanti.

As is often the case with such intrigues, the quartet justified its action with moral arguments. They were unable to reconcile cooperation with the successor party to the east German ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party) with their conscience, they explained at a press conference. And this despite the fact that they had supported Ypsilanti's plans for months and, in the case of the deputy chairman of the SPD, Jürgen Walter, had played a leading role in working out the SPD-Green coalition agreement.

Their claims of qualms of conscience are a smokescreen. In fact, the right wing in the SPD and the business lobby behind it were quite prepared to cooperate with the SED as long as the latter kept the population of east Germany in check. In the 1980s, SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt maintained close relations with the head of the SED, Erich Honecker, and west German business circles profited accordingly. The same business interests are also full of praise for the radical austerity policies of the SPD-Left Party Senate in Berlin.

The reasons for the last-minute intervention by the SPD right wing against Ypsilanti are much more mundane. Some of the measures agreed to in the coalition contract were not to the liking of the energy and chemical concerns and the airport operator Fraport, which dominate the state's economy. Particular points of contention were the plans to delay the extension of Frankfurt airport and a ban on night-time flights, as well as the shutdown of two reactors at the Biblis nuclear power plant. The SPD and the Greens had agreed on these points in response to demands from

their own middle-class supporters in southern Hesse, who suffer from the consequences of aircraft noise in the vicinity of the airport and are fearful of a possible accident at the aged Biblis reactor.

All four opposition deputies belong to the business wing of the Hessian SPD. It is not clear whether remuneration or the prospect of a lucrative job helped lubricate their "consciences," but this is not the main issue. More important is the fact that they knew they had the backing of the SPD leadership in Berlin. The new national SPD leadership tandem of Franz Müntefering and Frank-Walter Steinmeier made no secret that, in their view, a state government in Hesse based on the toleration of the Left Party would be an obstacle for the SPD in the 2009 federal election.

New elections will now be held in Hesse in January 2009. The Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) are reckoned to be in strong positions for the new election, while the SPD faces, according to polls, declining support. The end result could well be to strengthen the hand of the widely despised CDU Prime Minister Roland Koch, who suffered a devastating rebuff at the polls in January, losing 12 percent of his previous level of support.

The Left Party bears a large degree of responsibility for this state of affairs. Its entire election campaign and subsequent support for Ypsilanti were directed at encouraging illusions in the SPD and leading its own voters into a trap. The German Socialist Equality Party, in its manifesto for the Hessian election in January, expressly warned of such a danger.

We wrote that the Left Party was seeking to "revive old discredited social democratic nostrums, which have long since failed in Germany and internationally." Our manifesto went on to say: "In this way the Left Party seeks to prevent important lessons being drawn from the bankruptcy of the SPD." We accused Lafontaine and the Left Party of attempting to "channel all those who turn away from the SPD, disillusioned by the framework of reformist politics, and lead them back into the fold of the social democracy via SPD-Left Party coalitions."

This warning has been completely confirmed. The current situation was predictable. The fact that for the SPD there can be "no politics directed against business" was well known, even prior to the formulation of the

phrase by former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder 10 years ago. Left Party Chairman Lafontaine is now wringing his hands over the "two-faced character" of the SPD. He knows better. After all, he was the SPD's chairman for three-and-a-half years.

The events in Hesse demonstrate that the working class can defend its interests only by breaking with the SPD and the Left Party and developing its own independent party, which places the interests of society as a whole above the profit interests of big business.

"The claim that it is possible to organise capitalist exploitation in a humane and socially responsible manner is fraudulent," we wrote in our manifesto for the Hessian election. "It serves to lull the working class and persuade it to refrain from revolutionary struggle, under conditions where right-wingers such as Schäuble, Beckstein and Koch are carrying out ever greater attacks on democratic rights and moving towards setting up a police state."



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