

The German Left Party in Hesse: open to the highest bidder

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The failure of Hesse Social Democratic Party chairperson Andrea Ypsilanti to take over the state parliament in a coalition with the Greens graphically exposes the role played by the Left Party. Under conditions in which the SPD right wing repeatedly dictated its own conditions and was prepared to sabotage the coalition at the last minute, the Left Party emerged as the only force that offered unconditional support for Ypsilanti. (See "Germany: SPD right wing sabotages change of government in Hesse.")

The Left Party state executive had repeatedly stressed during recent days that it would unconditionally support Ypsilanti. Last Friday (i.e., prior to state conferences held by the SPD and the Greens), the Left Party recommended its six deputies support the election of Ypsilanti as state prime minister—although the Left Party is merely "tolerated" and would not be regarded as a full coalition partner.

On October 24—one day after the presentation of the coalition contract of the SPD and Greens—the leader of the Left Party parliamentary group in Hesse, Willi van Ooyen, praised the document before the press, stating that it contained many formulations drawn from the Left Party. It was a "positive beginning" that "social justice has in principle been established," he said. It should be noted that van Ooyen's comments came prior to any discussion by the party's own regional council on the coalition paper.

On Monday, when four right-wing SPD deputies went public on their refusal to support Andrea Ypsilanti, van Ooyen was furious. He declared in an initial statement: "This is a black day for Hesse." It was unprecedented for representatives of the SPD to smooth the way for the Hesse Christian Democratic Union. The CDU and its "steel helmet [Stahlhelm] group in the

state parliament," led by the acting Prime Minister Roland Koch, would now continue "an antisocial and anti-ecological policy."

The previous day, the regional council of the Left Party had unanimously approved the SPD-Green coalition contract. A statement issued by the council reads: "In an intensive discussion, the regional party council politically evaluated the coalition contract of the SPD and Greens."

Then followed the sort of rhetoric typical of the Left Party. "The regional council was unanimously of the opinion that the coalition contract does not represent a change in policy," the council statement declared, while claiming at the same time that the contract represents "a recognisable change in direction" with regard to government policy in Hesse. On this basis, the statement concludes, the Left Party declares its support for Ypsilanti.

In fact, it is only possible to properly assess the SPD-Green coalition contract by examining its provisions in more detail. Behind a collection of vague reformist promises, the contract represents the continuation of the state government's austerity policies carried out at the behest of big business and the banks.

Sections of the 111-page contract read like a reformist self-help programme aimed at improving capitalism. The document is full of various marketing concepts, including proposals for new small businesses to promote pollution-control technology and renewable energies, tourism, etc., combined with diffuse social demands.

The contract proposes the creation of 50,000 new jobs in the Hesse ecology sector by 2013, an expansion of the minimum wage to include all part-time agency workers, improved educational opportunities and more teachers, more rights for immigrants and women, etc.,

etc.

While some of these demands sound progressive, in reality they are in line with the policies of conservative politicians and industrial leaders. At the heart of the demand for better education, for example, is the call for increased self-sufficiency on the part of schools and universities on budget questions, and increased ties to business. These are demands shared by CDU education ministers and will only lead to greater stratification between poorer and richer regions of the country.

Investment in pollution-control technology also has long been regarded by sections of the business elite as a highly profitable measure. The coalition contract's proposed project to improve the public infrastructure via "contract financing" boils down to the increased transfer of public services to private business concerns. Such measures are now commonplace and result in low-wage jobs at the expense of full-time, properly paid work in public service rather than leading to any benefits to the infrastructure.

The contract's position with regard to "social justice" is made clear in the chapter on "budget and finances." The state government led by Koch has amassed a budget deficit of €1.5 billion. An SPD-Green coalition, with the support of the Left Party, is determined to balance the budget—even if it proposes to do so in 2011, somewhat later than the date proposed by Koch himself.

The balancing of the state budget "brooks no more delay," the contract partners state. While they wish to avoid the sort of "social eradication carried out by the Koch government...a dismantling of the deficit can only be achieved if state expenditures are examined on the basis of necessity. In addition, new measures can only be financed by reorganising existing budget priorities." Finally, the contract makes reference to the "comprehensive cash deficit" and proposes a joint budget for years 2009 and 2010.

An Ypsilanti government would have done little to change the drastic domestic policies of the Koch regime, despite the coalition partners' lip service to democratic values. Apart from a few cosmetic measures, such as the abolition of DNA tests for youth under 14 years of age, the coalition agreement acknowledges its adherence to Hesse's public security laws and calls for a strengthening of the police through more recruitment.

Taken as a whole, the coalition programme represents not the slightest danger to the capitalist elite. The criticism of the contract by some business representatives and SPD deputies Dagmar Metzger and Jürgen Walter are mainly aimed at proposals to delay the expansion of Frankfurt airport—a project that stands to reap big profits for a number of local business concerns.

The readiness of the Left Party to back the pro-business agenda outlined in the contract had been predicted in advance. In the *Spiegel-online* edition of October 29, Hesse Greens chairman Tarek Al-Wazir declared that the Left Party had "expressly avowed it is ready to agree to a joint budget for 2009 and 2010."

This means that the Left Party had already committed itself to support social cuts and drastic austerity measures in the interests of balancing the state budget.

Despite the complete subservience of the Left Party, the SPD right wing has now sunk Ypsilanti's chances of taking power and at the same time made a mockery of the main claim by the Left Party: that it is still possible to pressure the SPD to the left.



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