

German Left Party creates new opportunity for the right in Hesse election

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On January 18, and for the second time in less than a year, the German state of Hesse will elect a new parliament. The state's conservative prime minister, Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), suffered a drubbing in the last election nearly a year ago but is now expected to make a political comeback.

According to recent opinion polls, a coalition of the CDU and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) will win a clear majority in the upcoming election. This will enable Koch, who was first voted in as state prime minister in 1999 and has governed the state for the past year without a majority, to be re-elected as prime minister for an additional four years.

The creation of a CDU-FDP coalition in Hesse is regarded in turn as an important signal for the next national elections due this September, where both parties favour forming such a coalition at the federal level.

How is one to explain the fact that Koch—who is regarded as a right-winger inside the conservative CDU, came to power on the backs of a vicious xenophobic campaign and is despised by broad layers of the state's electorate—has been able to stay in power for so long?

The most frequently cited reason in the media is a series of tactical mistakes on the part of Andrea Ypsilanti, the chair of the state's main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the election campaign a year ago, Ypsilanti ruled out any sort of collaboration with the Left Party—only to go on to attempt to form a SPD-Green Party coalition with the tacit support of the Left Party after these three parties won a majority of votes.

The right wing inside the SPD, which preferred to establish a coalition with Koch and the CDU, immediately accused Ypsilanti of breaking her word in regard to the Left Party and at the last minute sabotaged her election as prime minister, although a political contract had been agreed and voted upon. It is now estimated that as a result, the SPD will lose massive electoral support and is expected to notch its worst-ever election result in the state.

The Left Party is also subject to fierce internal battles. A number of members have quit the party, including a former leading candidate, and it is not clear if the party will obtain the 5 percent necessary by German electoral law for representation in parliament. The Left Party has also blamed the SPD for the current debacle, accusing it of irresponsibility and "bad party organisation."

The problems in Hesse, however, did not begin with the collapse of the SPD-Green-Left Party coalition, but rather with the attempts to put such a coalition together in the first place—and in this respect, the Left Party bears the main responsibility. It did everything it could to subordinate the growing opposition in Hesse to social cuts and the decline in the state's educational structure—i.e., all those factors that led to Koch's defeat—to the SPD. In so doing, the Left Party was well aware that both the SPD and the Greens also shared responsibility for the social and educational decline in the state.

Hesse should serve as a warning about a type of politics that rejects an independent orientation for the working class in favour of supporting the SPD as the "lesser evil."

In the election campaign last year, the Left Party had already made clear that it was prepared to support the election of Ypsilanti as state prime minister. The Left Party then gave the SPD a blank cheque in the negotiations last year for an SPD-Green Party coalition programme—fully aware that the state had a deficit of €1.5 billion and that Ypsilanti had announced a new drastic round of savings and cuts.

Even when crisis enveloped the banking metropolis of Frankfurt and Ypsilanti made it known that she was developing her programme in close talks with leading business and finance circles, the Left Party held grimly onto its orientation to the SPD. Untiringly, the party declared that a coalition with the SPD presented possibilities for more "equality of opportunities" and "social justice."

The Left Party conducted a polemic against the anti-social Hartz IV laws and the Agenda 2010, despite the fact that its erstwhile partners—the SPD and the Greens—were the initiators of these measures. It was the SPD-Green Party federal coalition (1998-2005) led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer that boasted it had overcome the "reform-logjam" of the preceding conservative government and "reformed" the welfare state in accordance with the wishes of big business. The enormous social decline that has swept across Germany during the past decade and plunged millions of citizens into poverty is largely a result of the policies of the SPD-Green government. Nevertheless, the Left Party still maintains that a new edition of such a coalition would represent a step forward in Hesse.

The decision by four right-wing rebels in the Hesse SPD to sabotage a SPD-Green-Left Party coalition in the state only served to shorten a chain of events that would have been inevitable even

if Ypsilanti and company had successfully taken over government. An SPD-Green Party government in Hesse would not have been any better than the Schröder-Fischer government at the federal level. Under conditions of a rapidly intensifying economic crisis, the programme of such a coalition in Hesse would have been dictated by the banks and major concerns. Disillusioned voters would have turned away from politics, creating opportunities for right-wing forces to profit.

There can be no doubt that the Left Party would have unconditionally supported such a development. This is clear when one considers the situation in other German states where the Left Party or its predecessor—the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism—held or still maintains power.

In the states of Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the Left Party has proved to be a reliable defender of the interests of the wealthy and powerful against the interests of the broad majority of the population. In the German capital of Berlin, where the Left Party has been in power for the past eight years with the SPD, the state Senate has eliminated tens of thousands of public service jobs while creating 35,000 low-wage jobs. Huge cuts have been made in the capital city's education budget affecting nurseries and universities, while parents are expected to pay for schoolbooks for their children. At the same time, the Senate has strengthened the powers of the police.

Unperturbed, the Left Party is determined to maintain its support for the SPD in the current election campaign in Hesse.

At the Left Party election conference in Hesse at the end of November, certain delegates spoke out against the economic crisis, growing social deprivation and the betrayals carried out by the SPD. Following the collapse of the project for an SPD-Green-Left Party coalition, the time was ripe, according to the party's parliamentary group leader Willi van Ooyen, for the party to "finally show its real face in the election campaign" and conduct a genuine "anti-capitalist election campaign" (parliamentary group vice chairman Janine Wissler).

However, despite such rhetoric, delegates voted at the end of the conference to continue their former political line. Following two days of denunciations of the SPD, combined with declarations of intent to go onto the "offensive against capitalism," van Ooyen bluntly summed up the party's perspective: "We will pressure the SPD even further to the left and increase the pressure on this party in order to implement an alternative form of politics in Hesse."

The same credo—all one has to do is exert sufficient pressure on the SPD—is also laid down in the Left Party election manifesto. A statement in the manifesto signed by Left leaders Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi declares: "The more successfully the Left argues for social justice...the greater will be the pressure on the SPD to become social democratic again."

This credo is false in two fundamental respects. First, the SPD has continually demonstrated that rather than reacting to pressure from the grass roots by moving to the left, it responds instead with intensified attacks on social and democratic rights. Second, the Left Party itself has reacted to the current economic crisis with a clear lurch to the right. Lafontaine's categorical support for the rescue programme for the banks drawn up by the German government is characteristic in this respect.

Another incident at its November election conference made clear the determination of the Left Party to defend the existing order. When one delegate dared to put forward a resolution proposing an occupation to prevent threatened job cuts at the Opel auto works, he was put under pressure to hastily withdraw his motion. Instead, the Left Party supports the co-management policies of the trade unions and works councils at Opel. The latter have already agreed to the promise of support by Koch for the auto concern, although the proposed credit is bound up with drastic wage cuts and worsened working conditions for the workforce.

The current election campaign has clearly exposed the role of the Left Party. It is nothing more than a junior partner of the SPD. Lafontaine created the party to breathe new life into, and save, the SPD. The principal task of the Left Party is to bind workers and youth to social democracy and the capitalist system and, above all, prevent them from turning to an independent socialist strategy.

In Hesse, one can observe the way in which such a policy serves to strengthen right-wing forces. Under the present conditions of crisis, this development contains enormous dangers for the working class. The CDU right-winger Koch has been able to hang onto power precisely because of the bankrupt politics of the SPD and the Left Party.

In its election statement a year ago, the Socialist Equality Party warned of exactly this danger and declared: "We reject the arguments of the Left Party, which is offering itself as a junior coalition partner to the Social Democratic Party (SPD)." The manifesto continued: "Global capitalism no longer allows for social reforms. Those, like the Left Party, who claim the contrary are simply deceiving the electorate. The time is long past when social conditions could be improved without challenging the capitalist basis of society. Only a socialist reorganisation of society can overcome poverty, unemployment and the danger of war, and utilise the enormous potential of modern technology to secure the well-being of all mankind."



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