Hesse state election in Germany

Build a socialist alternative for the working class

German Socialist Equality Party
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On Sunday, elections will take place for the Hesse state parliament. The vote takes place only one year after the previous election. Over that period, every attempt to form a viable state government has failed.

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) calls upon voters not to support any of the parties on the ballot, including the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. The experiences of the last twelve months have shown that the only way to combat the consequences of the international capitalist crisis and the attacks of the state government of Roland Koch is to build a genuine socialist alternative for the working class.

In the state election of January 2008, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its right-wing representative in Hesse, Roland Koch, suffered a considerable defeat. The party lost 12 percent of its vote compared to the previous state election and lost its overall majority in the state parliament. This meant that the CDU was unable to form a state government, even with the help of its favored political partner, the "free market" Free Democratic Party.

The result of the 2008 election reflected a significant turn to the left by the population of Hesse, which was no longer prepared to tolerate Koch's social attacks and right-wing demagogy.

Since first taking power in 1999 on the basis of a vicious xenophobic campaign, the Koch government has carried out one attack after another on the state's social welfare network. It slashed €1 billion from social programs and carried out a policy of privatisation affecting schools, hospitals, housing associations and public transport. Instead of introducing its promised "education guarantee," the Koch government implemented policies resulting in overcrowded classrooms, fewer educational opportunities and the imposition of student fees. Under Koch, 250,000 people in Hesse have been reduced to surviving on miserly Hartz IV welfare payments. A quarter of all children in the state's biggest city, the banking metropolis of Frankfurt, live in poverty.

The opposition to Koch, however, lacks any alternative political perspective. It appeared to many workers that the only answer to Koch in 2008 was a vote for the SPD and its chairperson in Hesse, Andrea Ypsilanti. At the time, our party, the PSG, warned against this illusion. In our 2008 election manifesto, we wrote: "The programs of the SPD and the CDU are virtually identical. This is shown by the fact that they are ruling together in a coalition at a federal level. Should Andrea Ypsilanti replace Hesse Minister-President Roland Koch in January, nothing would change politically."

We drew attention to the profound changes which had taken place in the international situation and emphasised that global capitalism no longer permitted any type of social reform: "The period in which one could improve the social situation without challenging the basis of capitalist society is long past. Only a socialist reorganisation of society can overcome poverty, unemployment and the danger of war, and utilise the enormous potential embodied in modern technology for the well being of humanity as a whole."

At the heart of the election campaign of the PSG was the "building of an international socialist party which fights against the danger of war, for the defence of democratic rights, for social equality and for the elimination of unemployment and poverty."

This perspective met with bitter opposition from the Left Party, whose entire election campaign was directed at replacing Koch with Ypsilanti. Even prior to the election, the Left Party had offered its services to assist the SPD in gaining power with its slogan "Koch Has to Go," and its assurance to Ypsilanti that the party would support an SPD/Green minority government in the state. The Left Party encouraged the illusion that one could persuade the SPD to return to the sort of social reform policies it carried out in the 1970s. In so doing, it sought to prevent voters from drawing any conclusions from the right-wing development of the SPD and turning towards a socialist perspective.

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As soon as the 2008 election was over, the Left Party offered the SPD and Greens a political blank check. Even when it became clear that a €1.5 billion deficit had emerged in the Hesse budget, which was to be reversed by a new round of social cuts, the Left Party maintained its unwavering loyalty to Ypsilanti. The party was prepared to support all of the social attacks, just as it has done as a partner in the Berlin state government for the past eight years.

However, the plans for an SPD-Green minority government with the support of the Left Party failed to come to fruition. In November, the perspective of the Left Party suffered a devastating reversal when four right-wing SPD deputies refused to vote in favour of an SPD-Green coalition tolerated by the Left Party. The four renegade deputies merely shortened a process that was inevitable. Even if Ypsilanti had taken over the post of minister-president in the state, it would have very quickly become clear that her policies represented no alternative to those of Koch.

The policy of the Left Party did bear fruit in one respect, however. The right-wing Christian Democrat Koch, whose political career appeared to be finished a year ago, can now hope to return to power and go on to play an important political role at a federal level. The illusion that the SPD represented a "lesser evil" and would revive a policy of social reforms only served to weaken the opposition against Koch and lead it into a dead end. It is now necessary to draw important political lessons.

The Hesse election in 2009 takes place under very different conditions from those that prevailed a year ago. The international financial crisis has developed into the worst recession since the 1930s. It augurs a period of massive attacks on the living conditions of workers all over the world, and not least in Hesse. The fate of Opel cars, one of the biggest employers in the state, hangs in the balance.

Both the CDU and the SPD have reacted to the crisis by turning further to the right. Following years in which they have slashed social welfare programs with the argument that the public purse is empty, they are now freeing up billions of euros to cover the speculative losses of major banks. At the same time, the federal finance minister, Peer Steinbrück (SPD), is preparing new measures to ensure that the burden of these new debts falls on the shoulders of the working population.

Nevertheless, the Left Party remains determined to support the SPD. At its election conference, the leading candidate of the Left Party, Willi von Ooyen, stressed that the aim of the Left Party was to pressure the SPD to the left.

At the same time, the Left Party itself has moved further to the right. Its national chairman, Oscar Lafontaine, has publicly backed the federal government's multibillion-euro bailout package for the banks. The chairman of the Left Party in Berlin, Klaus Lederer, has publicly spoken out in favour of the Israeli terror in Gaza, and the Left Party in Hesse is forcing out those members of the party who are not prepared to accept its total subordination to the SPD.

The Left Party is nothing other then a handmaiden of the SPD. Its central aim is to prevent workers and youth turning to an alternative socialist perspective.

The building of a socialist alternative is more important than ever. The Socialist Equality Party has not put forward its own candidates for Sunday's election in Hesse. With a total of 15 elections due this year in Germany, we have decided to concentrate our resources on the European elections this summer and the federal elections later this year.

But we make an urgent appeal to all those who are no longer prepared to accept unemployment, the destruction of social gains, attacks on democratic rights and militarism: Draw the lessons of Hesse! Take part in the building of a new workers' party that fights for the construction of a socialist society and the nationalisation of the major banks and industries under the democratic control of the working population. Read and study the *World Socialist Web Site*. Join and help build the Socialist Equality Party, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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