Germany: The role of the Left Party in the destruction of Berlin’s education

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Recent months have seen a constant stream of news reports about the precarious state of Berlin's schools. The rapid decline of the public education system has been directed by the city government—the Social Democratic Party-Left Party Berlin Senate.

Overcrowded classrooms, frequent cancellation of classes, run-down school buildings and acts of violence mark everyday school life in Berlin. These conditions were highlighted recently in a letter to the Senate from 68 school heads from the Berlin-Mitte district.

The letter says that normal schooling is not possible and that it is impossible to fulfil the legal educational requirements under the present conditions. Education in the district is facing a complete collapse. Following an earlier administrative reform, Berlin-Mitte—a district that is home to much beautiful architecture and also includes central government buildings—now also encompasses the former districts of Tiergarten and Wedding, areas of considerable social deprivation.

In their letter, the school heads deplore the serious structural failings in their school buildings. For years, too few means have been made available to provide for the children of immigrants and from families dependant on welfare, they say, which in Berlin-Mitte comprise 65 percent of all pupils.

It is not only school heads from the so-called problem districts with a high proportion of immigrants who are complaining about the catastrophic conditions. The mayors of Berlin's more "middle class" districts have also drawn attention to the fact that their budgets have reached the limit.

This situation is a direct result of the rigid austerity measures with which the SPD-Left Party Senate has systematically destroyed Berlin's education system over the past seven years.

An important role in this is being played by the Left Party, which often stresses that the person responsible for education, Senator Jürgen Zöllner, is a Social Democrat. But Zöllner could not implement his aggressive austerity measures without the close collaboration of the Left Party.

The SPD and Left Party are also united in their rejection of the demands made by the 68 school heads in their letter. In a newspaper interview, the leader of the Left Party's faction in the Senate, Carola Blum, rejected the school heads' criticism and claimed indirectly that they were responsible for the misery in Berlin's schools. She claimed provocatively that it would first have to be established what had happened to the funds provided to the schools by the Senate.

One of the letter's initiators, the director of the John Lennon High School, Jochen Pfeifer, criticized the role of Senator Heidi Knake-Werner (Left Party). As in a previous instance, the Left Party senator ignored the criticism for weeks and acted with a complete lack of concern, Pfeifer charged.

Knake-Werner had been a functionary of the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party) in Oldenburg, who after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 joined the Party of Democratic Socialism (which is today one of the components of the Left Party). For years, she has played a key role in pushing through cuts in social spending in the Berlin Senate. She was senator for health, social affairs and consumer protection for four years, and since the end of 2006 has been senator for integration, work and social affairs.

Thanks to the collaboration of the Left Party, Senator Zöllner refused to provide a written answer to the school heads' letter, which he received in December. At the end of January, he then met with some of the signatories for a discussion and promised to appoint an additional 14 social workers, which had already been planned for some time. Zöllner made no promises, however, about appointing new teachers.

Some of the school heads were also invited to a meeting in the office of federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union). This meeting proved to be little more than a media stunt.

The cuts in every area of social life stand in glaring contrast to the hundreds of billions of euros being spent by the federal government to support the banks and defend the interests of a tiny elite, which continues to enrich itself at the expense of the general population.

In Berlin, the social crisis is expressed most sharply. For over seven years, the city government, comprising the SPD and Left Party, has made the harshest attacks on social and cultural spending, in close collaboration with the trade unions. The devastation of education is only one aspect of the unparalleled welfare cuts that have taken place under the SPD-Left Party Senate.

On their respective web sites, both SPD and Left Party paint a rosy picture of their education policies, and proclaim the supposed successes of their cooperation in the city legislature. On the ground, however, the results of their policies look completely different. An educational policy that truly met the needs of the majority would require the redistribution of society's wealth, which presently flows into the pockets of a tiny financial elite as a result of the policies pursued by all the establishment parties.

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The web site of the Senate's education, science and research department proclaims that 165 teachers are being hired for the second half of the school year. But in reality these posts are only to replace teachers who have retired or are working reduced hours prior to retirement. No additional teaching jobs are being created.

The Senate also boasts that Berlin schools have a 100 percent teacher supply. But this figure is only arrived at through a budgetary trick by the Senate, which fails to provide sufficient resources to enable schools to cover all necessary teaching time.

Agency teachers are only employed on a temporary basis and must register as unemployed at the beginning of the vacation, which is both humiliating and discouraging. Berlin teachers, who are lower paid than in other states, are leaving the district in droves. In particular, young teachers face enormous frustrations. They no longer automatically receive the protections of civil service status, and earn €500 to €700 less than similarly qualified colleagues, while undertaking the same duties.

The Senate has announced it will spend about €30 million in 2009 to repair and redevelop schools, with an additional €50 million from under-spending in 2008 also being made available. While at first glance these sums seem enormous, the actual need for repairs in schools and child day-care centres in Berlin has been estimated at more than €950 million—due to a failure of investment resulting from years of "compulsory savings" by the Senate.

Many schools suffer structural problems: broken toilets, a lack of specialist classrooms, crumbling facades and damaged buildings, leading to the closure of classrooms and stairways. At the beginning of the year, some pupils faced freezing schools due to defective heating and frozen water pipes. Some schools also lack school secretaries and caretakers. The additional funds coming from the federal government for the next three years for school repairs and redevelopment will only cover half of the sum actually required.

While acts of violence are not a rarity, and many students come from backgrounds of poverty and neglect, there is shortage of social workers in the Berlin schools, because the Senate has cut the educational assistance budget by millions.

More than in most other German states, school success for students in Berlin is strongly dependent on social origin. At schools where the majority of children have an immigrant background, two thirds of all pupils come from socially deprived families. But under the SPD-Left Party Senate, free schoolbooks have been abolished and language support has been cut.

At the same time as state schools are being starved of proper financial resources, private schools are sprouting like mushrooms in Berlin. Parents who can find a way to send their children to such schools do so, leading to a further lowering of standards at the state schools. Wealthy parents can pay tuition for their children, but poor children are at a decided disadvantage.

Even the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is alarmed at the misery in education in the German capital: "Poverty, violence, neglect, poor language skills are accumulating in the schools of [Berlin] Mitte and are driving everyone out for whom their children's education is a high priority. The number of private schools has risen precipitously, and also bespeaks the actions taken by disappointed parents." Increasingly, pupils are leaving school without achieving the grades needed for an apprenticeship. This could lead to a massive social explosion, according to the FAZ.

Numerous demonstrations have been held to protest the education policy of the SPD-Left Party Senate, including a demonstration in November 2008 by thousands of pupils. There have been strikes by pupils and teachers.

A few days after the November protest, the longest-running industrial struggle in the public sector—in which teachers had fought against the systematic worsening of their conditions—was ended by the trade unions with a shabby sell-out. After almost one-and-a-half years, which had witnessed numerous protest actions and strikes against the cuts of the Senate, the unions agreed a new contract with a further lowering of real wages. The teachers' union was able to push through this rotten deal only with great difficulty.

The SPD and Left Party in Berlin have reacted to the growing resistance they face with increasingly authoritarian measures. Their proposal for the setting up of a central pupil database should be seen in this context. The claim that this database would only be used to establish the correct need for teachers in Berlin's schools is a deliberate deception. This need has long been well known.

The state is building up its means of surveillance through the collection of names, dates of birth and other personal data, including school attendance, distinguishing features, country of origin and language, medical information, "support needs" and social status—altogether 16 different data sets. According to the *Berliner Zeitung*, neither parents nor pupils will have the right to prevent the collection of such personal information. The Senate fears that the widespread anger and opposition could suddenly be expressed in a wave of school occupations and mass demonstrations, like those recently seen in France and Greece.

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