

## Local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia

# German Left Party ready to work with right-wing CDU

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Following a series of electoral defeats for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a pronounced decline in that party's membership, the Left Party is evidently looking to develop political relations with parties even further to the right on the German political spectrum.

Just a week ago the regional chairman of the Left Party in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Wolfgang Zimmermann, told the *Frankfurt Rundschau*: "Of course we can vote together with the CDU [the right-wing Christian Democratic Union]. When we agree on content, then we have absolutely no problem with that."

This political offer to the CDU, which for years has been the driving force behind the privatization of public services and the associated social decline, both at a federal level and especially in North Rhine-Westphalia, reflects a further turn to the right by the Left Party. In order to cover his tracks, Zimmermann added, one could possibly agree (with the CDU) that "one should not privatize public property or perhaps on a better bus ticket for Hartz IV welfare recipients."

Whom does Zimmermann expect to fool with such comments? Who genuinely expects the CDU to break from its antisocial policies? There is a different issue at stake here. The state and local elections which took place on Sunday reveal growing public opposition to the country's two main "Peoples Parties"—the CDU and SPD. In this situation, the Left Party is presenting itself as a force for constitutional stability prepared to enter an alliance with either the SPD or CDU to maintain law and order.

That is the lesson to be drawn from recent experiences in Berlin. Following the collapse of the city coalition of the CDU and SPD ten years ago due to their involvement in the scandal of the bankrupt Berlin Banking Society, the Left Party moved in to save the fortunes of the SPD. Since then it has run the city as part of a coalition administration with the SPD. The results for the capital's working population have been disastrous.

Today, whole suburbs of Berlin have degenerated into ghettos where poverty predominates. One child in three in the city is dependent on welfare benefits and the wages of public service workers are approximately ten percent less than the federal average. In charge of social services in the city for over a decade and with prime responsibility for such developments was Heidi Knake-Werner—a former member of the German Communist Party and the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), currently a leading member of the Left Party.

Wolfgang Zimmermann belongs to the same layer of cynical ex-leftists. For decades the 59-year-old has been a leading trade union bureaucrat in the public service union, Verdi, and has had his hand in a string of sell-outs at both a local and national level. At the same time he has sought to cultivate a leftist image, publishing articles in the "left" opportunist *SOZ* (Socialist Newspaper).

As a longtime member of the PDS, Zimmermann is very well aware of the party's record and knows that it

has supported pro-business, anti-welfare policies in all those regions where it has held power. Berlin is not the exception, but rather the rule.

Some prominent members of the Left Party in western Germany claim, however, that they pursue a different and more radical policy than the Left Party in the east of the country where many former cadre of the East German Stalinist party—the SED (Socialist Unity Party)—still hold major political positions. At a meeting in Bielefeld in March, for example, a leading figure in the western German Left Party, Sarah Wagenknecht, told WSWS reporters that the devastating social balance-sheet in Berlin was the product of east German PDS members and was not representative of the Left Party. The fact that the Left Party is now extending its hand to the right-wing CDU in the west of the country makes a mockery of this stance.

The results of the local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia over the weekend make clear that while the CDU lost support the SPD was unable to capitalize. Increasingly political commentators are pointing to the necessity of collaboration between the SPD and Left Party, possibly in a union with the Greens, in order to contain growing popular discontent. The significance of Zimmermann's comments is that the Left Party will not restrict its collaboration to the SPD and the Greens, but is also prepared to work together with the CDU, the principal party of postwar German capitalism.

Most municipalities in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia are heavily in debt due to the desperate financial situation and are under considerable pressure to undertake even more drastic social cuts. Zimmermanns' offer to the CDU makes clear that the Left Party will not stand in the way of such anti-social policies.

Using the argument that it was necessary to prevent the worst, housing stock in East German municipalities—e.g. in Dresden and Berlin—has been sold off to private equity firms, all with the support of the Left Party. The result of such a policy is higher rents and a deterioration of tenant services.

In the east of the country there have already been a

number of examples of collaboration between the Left Party and the CDU. In 2006 the Left Party and the CDU supported a joint candidate for the post of mayor in Cottbus and both parties shared posts in 2008 in the city administration of Chemnitz.



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