

Education spending targeted by all parties in Germany

Johannes Stern
29 October 2009

When it comes to education policy, all of Germany's political parties are united. In theory they all refer to the central importance of education and research, but in practice funds for education are continually being reduced and jobs cut back. Or, as is the case with the current coalition government of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), they resort to fiddling the books.

The current promises by the coalition government to increase expenditures on education and research are fraudulent. Instead, the most varied types of expenditures are now being defined as spending on education to give the appearance of increases.

According to information from a conference of Finance Ministers, the government is planning to declare current applicable state payments for older children as expenditure for education. This adds an additional 4.4 billion euros to the education "budget", although in fact not a single extra euro has been invested.

On the basis of this fiddling of the books, the pensions of teachers and professors and even tax exemptions for enterprises that invest in research are to be declared part of the budget for education.

Should additional funds eventually be made available, they will flow into a so-called "national scholarship system," which is to be funded equally by federal and state authorities and private enterprise. This "national scholarship system" will provide a small layer with a sum of 300 euros per month. As part of the scheme, universities are urged to turn to private companies to obtain scholarships. In this way, the government will make research at universities increasingly dependent on the goodwill and interests of

big business.

There is already a high degree of selection in the German education and scholarship system, which above all benefits students from wealthy families: The government's planned measures will only further the trend to a two-tier system. In Germany, social origin is already a decisive factor for further education. In 2006, the proportion of students with parents from a non-academic background going on to study at university was just 14 percent.

As the CDU/CSU-FDP government now intensifies the liberalization and selectivity of the education system, it is able to draw on the devastating work already carried out by the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party.

The so-called Bologna process was introduced in 1999 by the SPD-Green federal government. It was drawn up by European Union authorities in order to establish free market criteria in the realm of education, thereby transforming education into a commodity. The measure established master's and bachelor's degrees and introduced so-called education credits.

Despite the election campaign promises at that time for a fairer education system and against the introduction of study fees, the latter step was commenced in a series of German states under the auspices of the SPD-Green coalition. Already in October 1998, just a few days after the election of the SPD-Green government, the SPD minister of science for the state of Lower Saxony, Thomas Oppermann, publicly called for the introduction of study fees. His remarks were then echoed by a number of SPD and Green politicians.

In the meantime, the SPD has actively promoted the introduction of long-term study fees (e.g. in Lower Saxony) and similar, so-called study accounts (North-

Rhine/Westphalia). In Hamburg, where the Greens head the city's administration in a coalition with the CDU, study fees for an initial course of study of 375 euros have already been introduced. In Saarland, the Greens have also pledged to support a similar policy.

In the course of its seven years in government, the SPD-Green coalition carried out the sharpest attacks on education and social gains in the history of the federal republic. They justified the introduction of study fees with the same argument that was used to implement anti-social policies such as the Agenda 2010 reform—i.e., practical constraints and the lack of money in the public treasury. This was after the same government had made enormous tax concessions to big business and lowered the top rate of tax for the rich from 53 to 42 percent.

However, nobody has used the argument of "practical constraints" to justify spending cuts in the sphere of education more than the Left Party. In coalition with the SPD in the Berlin Senate, it has organized and implemented an unparalleled barrage of such cuts in recent years.

The Left Party and the SPD have cut a total of 75 million euros from Berlin universities, including the reduction of 216 professorial posts (almost a quarter of all such posts) and the axing of a further 500 university staff. Entire faculties have been closed and a total of 10,000 university places cut.

In Berlin's schools, which like its universities are already outmoded, under-financed and understaffed, the Senate axed provisions that provided free teaching material. Parents now have to pay an average additional charge of up to 100 euros per year, per child, for such materials. In addition, the Senate canceled 400 apprentice teacher posts in the capital in 2005 and 2006, condemning those losing their posts to the types of precarious working and living conditions that increasingly prevail in Berlin.

Over the same period, the workload of the city's teachers was increased by an average of two hours per week. This measure alone has led to an increasing work burden for teachers and made high-quality instruction even more difficult. The extra work time cuts directly into important educational projects carried out by teachers outside of official instruction time.

The Senate has also increased fees at the Berlin's day-care centers by up to 40 percent, forcing many less well

off families to limit day care for their children to just half a day.

The Left Party is just as determined to carry out similar policies in the future. The SPD-Left Party coalition, which has been formed in the state of Brandenburg (the state adjoining Berlin), has already declared its intention of slashing 11,000 jobs in the state administration.

Organizations such as the Left.SDS, the student organization of the Left Party, are protesting over the new government's plans for education, but they remain completely silent on the record of their own party. If one thing is clear from the past decades, then it is that an SPD-Left Party administration represents no alternative to the CDU/CSU and the FDP when it comes to education.



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