

Germany: The Left Party in power implements massive job cuts

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Four weeks after German state elections, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party (Die Linke) have wasted no time in forming a coalition to govern the state of Brandenburg. The Left Party has agreed to practically all the terms demanded by the SPD.

This is not very surprising, seeing as the political programmes of both parties are pretty much identical. And in two controversial areas—massive public sector job cuts and lignite power plants—the Left Party has totally capitulated to the SPD line.

As demanded by the SPD, the numbers employed in public services will be reduced from the current 51,000 to 40,000 over the next few years. The Left Party, which likes to pose as the defender of the social welfare state, has taken on the role of destroying every fifth job in the public service sector.

The reward they get for this will be, amongst other things, four ministerial positions. Members of the Left Party will take over the highly appropriate positions of finance minister, responsible for the budget cuts; justice minister; minister for the environment, health and consumer protection; as well as minister for economic and European affairs.

The fact that the Left Party will take over all key positions except the internal posts has caused some surprise. The fact that the SPD under the leadership of Matthias Platzeck wants to relinquish these decisive government posts, while the Left Party is so keen to take them on, is of great political significance.

We can deduce two things from this: Firstly, the Left Party has committed itself to assuming government positions. Faced with an acute crisis in the capitalist economy together with the continuing disintegration of the SPD, it is offering its services as reliable pillars to prop up the crumbling social order.

Secondly, more than a few SPD leaders, like Platzeck

himself, the current mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit and the SPD general secretary, Andrea Nahles, see the necessity of entering into various alliances with the Left Party in view of the drastic decline in support for the SPD. They are helping the Left Party move into the highest ruling positions in order to support the party's move to the right. The Brandenburg experience offers a kind of "baptism of fire" for the Left Party. Just as in Berlin, the party will now have to prove that it can work as a team with the SPD to implement social cuts and austerity measures, and is thereby able to ensure that Brandenburg can do this more effectively than any other federal state government.

The decision of the Left Party to assume the highest government positions in Brandenburg undoubtedly reflects pressure from party leaders Oscar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. The duo had already tried to gain government positions in the states of Saarland and Thuringia, but, despite winning the required majorities in the state elections, the SPD in Thuringia and the Green Party in Saarland both chose instead to form coalition governments with the Christian Democratic Party (CDU).

All those who maintained that the so-called "red-red" coalition government in Berlin, with its record of welfare cuts and measures hostile to working-class interests, was an aberration, are now getting a resounding wake-up call. After the signing of the coalition agreement in Brandenburg, it is very difficult to claim that the Left Party is somehow to the left of the SPD. It remains to be seen which party will prove to be the main driving force behind job cuts and the dismantling of social services. Much of the content of the coalition agreement is intentionally formulated in vague language, in order to allow future austerity measures to be justified by reference to the obligation of politicians to stop increasing public debts.

In order to get into government, the Left Party was even

prepared to immediately drop election promises. Up to the election, it supported the protest movement of the people of Lusatia (an east German region with more than a million inhabitants), who are opposed to the further use of lignite in power plants. They are campaigning against excavation works in villages and against the polluting effects of carbon dioxide released by the production process.

It is noteworthy that the “red-red” coalition agreement in Brandenburg has been welcomed universally by the media. With some evident surprise, the media has reported on the thoroughly harmonious relations between the SPD and Left Party and how they are seeking to continue a wide range of policies extending from business to education that were formerly planned by the previous “red-black” (SPD-CDU) coalition. A political commentator in the *Berliner Zeitung* even spoke of the Brandenburg coalition as a “pilot project for federal state politics.”

Just to cite a few examples of the abandoned “left” policies, the conversion of secondary schools to comprehensive schools and an environmentally friendly energy policy are no longer on the agenda. Even the so-called “successes” that the Left Party has claimed are, on closer inspection, just empty packaging. A total of 1,250 additional teaching posts are to be created by 2014—but this figure in fact represents only a fraction of the true requirements. Even during its election campaign, the Left Party raised the demand for 2,500 new teachers. And in any case, the new teaching posts will be offset by other planned cuts in public service jobs.

Even the public works programme, in which supposedly 8,000 community service jobs will be created, turns out to be just a measure to take long-term unemployed people out of the jobless figures and shunt them into the low-paid job sector. Incidentally, the funding for this project continues to be dependent upon financial backing from the federal level. Even the extreme extension of police powers in Brandenburg, implemented during the former SPD-CDU coalition by right-wing Home Minister Jörg Schönbohm, is not to be abolished, but only “investigated.” These new police powers include, among other things, the collection and storing of car license plate numbers and the ability to locate people through their cell phones.

With regard to the European Union, the Left Party has committed itself to accept everything contained in the Treaty of Lisbon. According to the Coalition Agreement, the federal state of Brandenburg fully abides by that

treaty.

With regard to the policies of the new government, in particular the reduction of public service jobs, the current and continuing prime minister, Matthias Platzeck (SPD), stated in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Already during our preliminary talks there was a constructive atmosphere. Our discussions are businesslike and it is clear on both sides that we have difficult times ahead. That is caused by the world financial crisis and by falling tax revenues, which are making it more difficult to maintain social cohesion.”

The newspaper asked Platzeck, “Brandenburg is facing a massive wave of job cuts in the public sector. Will the Left Party go along with this?” He replied: “I don’t see any difference here between the Left Party and the SPD. When we have to make tough budget decisions, that is a problem for each party. Nobody gets any applause for this, but often critical protest.... The Federal state budget is 1.5 billion euros overdrawn. There are no reserves for new welfare initiatives.”

In keeping with the bureaucratic tradition of Stalinism and Social Democracy, the Left Party and the SPD already made sure that their members would neither be allowed to voice opinions nor be part of the decision-making process. Yet more evidence that not a spark of internal democracy exists in these parties.

After 10 years of a “grand coalition” with the CDU, Platzeck (SPD), who was re-elected as prime minister November 6, had decided some time ago to withdraw from this alliance and form a government with the Left Party. His move was met with incomprehension and sharp criticism from the CDU and from within his own ranks.

But whoever looks closely at the coalition agreement and the composition of new government ministers can detect what Platzeck has in mind. He considers the Left Party far better suited than the CDU to effectively carry out the planned assault against working people. Already at the beginning of coalition talks, he had justified his preference for a “red-red” regime by saying that he saw the Left Party as a more reliable partner in implementing the forthcoming tough policies in the state.



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