

North Rhine-Westphalia: Left Party plays key role in facilitating SPD-Green coalition

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On Wednesday Hannelore Kraft, Social Democratic Party, was elected prime minister of Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia. She will head a minority government in a coalition with the Greens that is dependent upon the political support of the Left Party. The active support of the Left Party was confirmed at a special congress of the party held last weekend in Leverkusen.

At the congress, 210 delegates voted by a large majority in favour of "the political framework motion" proposed by the Left Party regional council. Just four delegates voted against, while six abstained. The eight-page motion declared, "We want to make a change of government possible by abstaining in the vote for the post of prime minister".

Just days later, the 11 Left Party deputies elected to the NRW state parliament announced that, instead of abstaining, they would actually vote in favour of Kraft should she fail to win an absolute majority in the first round of voting. This would thus guarantee her election and strengthen the SPD against any possible revolt from inside the party. In the event, Kraft was elected with a total of 90 votes.

The framework document once again confirms that the main task of the Left Party is to create as many illusions as possible in the SPD and the Greens, the two parties that have become synonymous with the dismantling of the German welfare state and growing social inequality following their period in power in a federal coalition (1998-2005).

The Left Party writes that the new SPD-Green state administration will privatise the state controlled WestLB bank, "reduce personnel in the public service" and implement social cuts. Nevertheless, the Left Party is eager to support the administration. The former Left Party regional chairman and current state parliamentary faction leader Wolfgang Zimmermann called the coalition agreement a "step in the right direction".

The direction in which the coalition is headed is very clear. Despite its deliberate vagueness and occasional rhetoric, the coalition agreement openly calls for a "checking of the books"—a process that has inevitably led to massive cuts in the past. The SPD and the Greens are intent on "consolidating the budget". With a budget of €53 billion, it is clear where the axe will fall: on expenditure on personnel, which constitutes €20 billion of this total.

The new state coalition plans to implement such job cuts with the support of the trade unions, and the new coalition agreement

contains proposals for legal changes aimed at intensifying collaboration with union bureaucrats.

The Left Party will actively support such austerity measures. The party would prefer to be directly involved in government and its framework motion stresses on a number of occasions that they were not responsible for the fact that they are not included in the new administration. Instead, "the open hand of friendship of the Left party was pushed aside".

The 11 deputies of the Left Party in the state parliament, comprising in the main former members of the SPD and Greens as well as trade unionists, will support the Kraft government on all important questions. The fact that the Left Party also declares that it will back "street protests" parallel to its support for the administration changes nothing. Such protests serve merely as a pressure valve aimed at defusing and preventing serious resistance to the state government.

In order to better carry out this double role of opposition in words, and support for the government in practice, the Left Party elected a handful of political cynics to its regional council at its congress last weekend. One of these figures is Thies Gleiss, who was elected with a large majority to the post of deputy regional chairman. Gleiss is a works council representative of the IG Metall trade union, a founding member of the West German Election Alternative group WASG and an active member of the Pabloite United Secretariat for the past 40 years. Gleiss will now sit alongside a host of former Greens, Social Democrats and trade unionists on the Left Party NRW council.

The new chairman of the council, replacing Wolfgang Zimmermann (who has a similar biography to Gleiss) is Hubertus Zdebel. Zdebel received 106 votes while 95 votes went to his rival candidate Paul Schäfer. Zdebel will carry out his function alongside joint regional chair Katharina Schwabedissen, who was reelected.

The fact that delegates had the choice of electing either Schäfer or Zdebel says more about the state of the party than a host of programs, verbose proclamations and party congress speeches.

Between 1970 and 1988 the 61-year old Paul Schäfer was a member of the Stalinist German Communist Party (DKP) before joining the SPD for career reasons in 1993. In 1999 Schäfer quit the SPD and joined the Party of Democratic Socialism (now the Left Party) one year later. Paul Schäfer has sat in the German parliament (Bundestag) since 2005 and is currently chairman of the Left Party faction in the parliamentary Defence Committee as

well as the party's spokesperson for defence and disarmament policy. He is a member of the supervisory board of the "Center for International Peace Deployment (ZIF)" in Berlin, which was set up in April 2002 by the former SPD-Green federal government.

He is also a member of the commission "European Security and the Future of the German Armed Forces" (IFSH) attached to the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg. The first director of the IFSH was Lieutenant General Wolf Graf Baudissin. Both the IFSH and ZIF see their task in advising and training politicians and military commanders in "science-supported services at the interface between civilian prevention of violence and the role of armed forces" (IFSH).

At the end of November 2009 the IFSH commission sent a document dealing with "internal leadership" of the German armed forces to members of the Bundestag defence, i.e., including Schäfer. The document called upon members of the German army to be prepared to use extreme military measures (Ultima Ratio) when called upon, and to be ready to justify such measures as the protection of German interests and not merely as a defensive response. Schäfer also voted in favour of the deployment of the German army to Sudan.

Hubertus Zdebel differs only slightly from Schäfer. Zdebel is close associate of Rüdiger Sagel, who sits for the Left Party in the NRW state parliament and is a deputy of party head Wolfgang Zimmermann. Zdebel and Sagel know each other from joint political work with the Greens in Münster. Zdebel sat in the Münster City Council for the Greens from 1987 to 1989. Sagel joined the Green Party in 1989. After trying his hand at journalism in the 1990s, Zdebel became an adviser to the Green Party Bundestag deputy Christian Simmert from 1998 to 2001. In 2001 he took over as office manager for his old acquaintance Sagel, who had in the meantime entered the NRW state parliament. In 2007, both Sagel and Zdebel quit the Greens and joined the Left Party. Both men are members of the Verdi public service trade union.

Shortly before the federal elections held last September Zdebel related his impressions of the election campaign for the online city magazine *Echo-Münster*. He praised the "fair contest over programs and standpoints in the podium debates" and added, "I have already known many of the candidates for a long time.... Ruprecht Polenz, for example, from the Christian Democratic Union, whom I know from the house occupation campaign in the middle of the seventies. And Daniel Bahr from the free-market FDP behaved very nicely to me—we come from the same part of town". Zdebel has even better relations with the candidates of the SPD and the Greens. "In principle they are people like us", Zdebel declared.

Zdebel, who describes himself as a "radically pragmatic politician", and Schwabedissen want to reorganize the party, which in some districts resembles "a heap of rubble" (Zdebel), in order to be facilitate the work of the minority government in implementing spending cuts and retrogressive changes to taxation and finance policy. According to Zdebel, the Left Party must tread "the narrow path between sectarianism and opportunism". His experiences with the Greens, which he left just three years ago, had taught him "how fast political content could be watered down and abandoned in favour of alleged facts on the ground".

In common with the entire regional council, Zdebel supports the Kraft government. Nevertheless he still occasionally opines over the necessity to take to the streets in order to step up pressure on the SPD and Greens. He has even gone so far as to call for a general strike in this respect.

In the case of Zdebel, it is difficult to judge where political savvy begins and political stupidity ends. All his talk of resistance is aimed solely at diverting attention away from the close cooperation between the Left Party and the SPD and Greens in North Rhine-Westphalia. Zdebel's job is to posture as a political rebel, while the Left Party demonstrates its reliability to the political establishment.

On Tuesday, the Left Party had its first sample of "facts on the ground". The state parliament elected the former CDU environment minister Eckhard Uhlenberg as its chairman. In a secret ballot the CDU politician won the support of 158 of the 181 deputies with only nine voting against his nomination; 14 abstained. Usually the post of chair of the state parliament is awarded to the parliamentary group with the most seats. However, following the state election in NRW earlier this year both the CDU and SPD tied with 67 seats apiece. The CDU insisted on taking up the post of chairman, however, claiming it had won more votes in the election.

Prior to the election the Left Party had already announced it would vote for Uhlenberg. "We will stick to the parliamentary rules, but expect others to do the same", declared Zimmermann. In return Zimmermann was calling upon the CDU to support Gunhild Böth, the Left Party candidate for the post of vice-chairman. In the event, Böth was elected in a further round of voting following talks between the SPD, the Greens and Left Party.

Uhlenberg, who is a farmer, then thanked delegates for their support and declared he would be a "chairman for all deputies".



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