

# German Left Party signals support for social austerity in state budget vote

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The Left Party in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia has positioned itself firmly on the side of the SPD/Green (Social Democratic Party and Green coalition) minority government, led by Hannelore Kraft (SPD). On Sunday December 5, a party conference in Bochum recommended passing the state government's supplementary budget. The Left Party regards this as a way of sending a political signal to government at the federal level that it supports the SPD and Greens, as they enact austerity measures against the working class.

The so-called National Party Council in Bochum followed the recommendation of the Left Party's parliamentary faction and its state executive. As a result, Left Party deputies will abstain in the vote on December 16, allowing the supplementary budget to pass. Kraft's government needs at least two abstentions on the part of the Left Party, because the CDU (the conservative Christian Democratic Union) and FDP (Free Democratic Party) have announced they will vote against the bill.

Kraft has led a minority government of the SPD and Greens in Düsseldorf since July. Although no formal "tolerance treaty" with the Left Party has been concluded, her government is dependent on their supporting votes or abstention to achieve a majority in the state parliament. Since her election as prime minister—also made possible by the abstention of the Left Party—the successive budget votes have been seen as crucial milestones in the survival of her government.

The Left Party's parliamentary faction leader, Wolfgang Zimmermann, had indicated before the meeting in Bochum that his faction would, if necessary, flout party resolutions in order to allow passage of the budget. But that proved to be unnecessary, as the Left Party as a whole is resolved to support the SPD/Greens state government. The decision of the 98-member party council was almost unanimous—there was only one abstention.

The Left Party has proceeded in line with its usual policy: it opposes the Kraft government in words, while supporting

it in deeds. The party council decision, which allowed the supplementary budget to pass, simultaneously declared it could not endorse the budget. "It would have been counter-productive to say 'no', although we still feel that the budget merits no consent," said Dirk Schmitz, a delegate from Bielefeld, echoing the line of the party leadership.

In the preceding months, the Left Party had repeatedly asserted that it would block the supplementary budget if the SPD and the Greens failed to reconsider their own proposals. These assurances have proven to be a mere smoke screen, aimed at fostering illusions in the SPD and the Greens, and stifle any left-wing opposition to the government.

The Left Party allowed the draft budget to pass even though it ignores all the recommendations the Left Party supposedly addressed to the government. For example, the student fees of €500 per semester will not—as requested by the party—be abolished in the summer semester of 2011, but half a year later. The number of tax inspectors will not be increased, and the €1.3 billion handout for the West German state-owned Landesbank bank will not be reduced.

The SPD and Greens had already gone back on election promises, notably by agreeing to allow the controversial large-scale industrial projects to proceed. These include a pipeline, operated by the Bayer chemical corporation and transporting poisonous carbon monoxide through a densely populated area from Krefeld to Dormagen, as well as the construction of a coal-fired power plant by major energy firm Eon in Datteln.

The Left Party also claims to oppose these projects and has threatened consequences if they are allowed to continue. In answer to a voter's question at the end of last month, Left Party parliamentary deputy Michael Aggelidis therefore declared: "The North Rhine-Westphalia faction and I say 'no' to any further building work at Datteln, without any ifs or buts. I've already stated this on several occasions".

The party council decision of December 5 openly admits that the SPD/Greens government is continuing the policies of its conservative predecessor: "The SPD and Greens said they would do quite a lot [about the power station], but so

far they have hardly done anything. So far, not a single bill has been tabled for legislation. In the past five years, the SPD and the Greens have made only slight adjustments to the neo-liberal austerity policies of the CDU and FDP”.

Kraft and her government have given the impression of being extremely relaxed in recent weeks and months. They are obviously not worried about the Left Party withdrawing their support.

They are even prepared to concede a few “political successes” to the Left Party, which in reality it did not achieve. Thus, the additional €370 million for the new nursery places, stipulated in the supplementary budget, was not a concession to the Left Party, as they claimed, but is the result of a verdict issued by the North Rhine-Westphalia Constitutional Court. In October, the court’s judges in Münster had already ruled that the previous government had failed to adequately support the municipalities in their expansion of nursery places for three-year-olds.

North Rhine-Westphalia lags far behind other German states when it comes to provision for children under three years of age. The extra money for the nursery places will come from additional revenue from the state financial compensation fund.

The full statement of the recent conference decision justified the Left Party’s support for the state government’s supplementary budget by claiming that it did not overstep the party’s so-called “red lines”—such as downsizing, privatisation and social cuts.

That is a lie. Firstly, by bleeding municipal councils of the necessary finance, the SPD/Greens minority government is dismantling social programs, cutting jobs, privatising public institutions and enterprises, and increasing fees for public utilities. Responsibility for these acts of social demolition is merely being shifted from the state to the local level. Secondly, it decided to make painful cuts to benefits for unemployed Hartz IV recipients.

This was the result of a decision reached by the Left Party in Bochum as well. That particular resolution called on the state parliamentary faction—“regardless of the supplementary budget”—to do everything possible to effect the withdrawal of a “practical proposal” scheduled by the Ministry of Labour, Integration and Social Affairs. This proposal reduces the residential space accorded to unemployed individuals from 47 to 45 square metres, which amounts to a *de facto* reduction in the Hartz IV recipients’ benefits for meeting housing and heating costs.

It should be noted that this “aid proposal” was approved by the SPD and Greens; it is not part of the legacy of the former CDU/FDP government.

In an attempt to disguise its support for the SPD/Greens

austerity policy, the Left Party’s state association organised a demonstration in front of the Düsseldorf parliament under the slogan, “For a social and ecological North Rhine-Westphalia”. At the same time the deputies in the parliament were ensuring the adoption of the supplementary budget and securing the survival of the government. Hannelore Kraft announced there would be new elections if the supplementary budget failed in the state parliament.

The Left Party would also offer unquestioning loyalty to an SPD/Green government at the federal level, as the Left Party delegate and former Green, Rüdiger Sagel, has stressed. The party confronts a decision that will affect the whole state and eventually the whole country, he said: “It will be hugely important for national politics”. It was not just about the future of the minority government in Dusseldorf, he continued, but also the power play in Berlin.

The business community and the media have long been critical of Angela Merkel’s CDU/FDP coalition government. Given the discord within the government, leading representatives of the ruling elite are increasingly looking to a return to power of the SPD and Greens. From the point of view of business circles, the 1998-2005 Gerhard Schröder (SPD)/Joschka Fischer (Greens) government was extremely successful in slashing social spending. They oversaw the introduction of a large low-wage sector of the economy, and the implementation of the Hartz IV laws, which effectively slashed unemployment benefits.

The Left Party stands ready to support such a government at the federal level, and provide it with a “left” disguise.



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