

Election manifesto of the Berlin Greens announces more austerity

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19 April 2011

According to current polls, Berlin could follow Baden-Württemberg next autumn to become the second German federal state to be governed by the Greens. Polling 29 percent, the environmental party is 2 percentage points ahead of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) trailing behind at 20 percent. The Left Party is stagnant at 14 percent, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) would fail to enter the Senate, with a mere 3 percent.

Having ruled the capital for 10 years, the alliance between the SPD and Left Party will scarcely be able to maintain a majority of seats in parliamentary elections on September 4. If the Greens continue to be the strongest party, Renate Künast—the former federal minister for consumer protection, agriculture and food—may well replace social democrat Klaus Wowereit as city mayor. The Greens would then be in a position to choose a coalition partner from the SPD or CDU, unless these latter parties—against all expectations—form a coalition against the Greens.

The Greens enter the election campaign with a manifesto recalling the world of Alice in Wonderland. The 230-page portrayal of the capital city is completely divorced from the day-to-day reality for its 3.5 million inhabitants. Everyone feels good; reason and tolerance triumph; the widespread poverty and unemployment in the city are swept aside with a few high-sounding words.

The very title of the election manifesto, “A City for All”, is emblematic. The Greens promise to champion the interests of everybody: the villa owner in Dahlem and the real estate broker in Grunewald, as well as the worker in Spandau, the Hartz IV (miserly benefits allowance) recipient in Marzahn and the immigrant in Neukölln. Since they represent the interests of “all”, they will not infringe on the privileges enjoyed by Berlin’s rich upper class, which separates it from the broad mass of the people. They have no intention of transforming a social reality marked by deep class antagonisms, but seek instead merely to change the perception of this reality.

Their manifesto does not mention the fundamental conflict of interests between salaried workers and people condemned to unemployment, on the one hand, and capital and property owners, on the other. There is simply no place for class contradictions in their programme. They are obfuscated and

buried under a jumble of hackneyed ideas derived from environmental, identity and cultural politics.

Buzzwords proliferating in the Greens’ manifesto include: “Unblock the logjams!” “a new political culture”, “politics of diversity”, “creativity”, “Berlin, city of gender equality”, “city of various sexual identities”, “Use a bicycle!” and—repeatedly—“climate capital—Berlin”, “green industrial revolution” and “ecological city development”. There is also no shortage of promises about social commitment. “Work and social security for all” is pledged, as is “quality education for all”.

Looking behind the flowery words, however, one encounters a very tough brand of class politics. The Greens are determined to push through the budget cuts dictated by finance capital, regardless of the consequences. They are intent on intensifying the austerity programme of Wowereit’s Berlin Senate. This is the only issue about which they are specific in the entire programme. They agree to abide by the “debt brake”, prescribed in the federal constitution, and reduce the city-state’s €60 billion debt as quickly as possible.

The manifesto states: “If we really want to be able to do something, we must effectively save at least €500 million in the next legislature, given the inevitable cost increases.... There will be no election handouts, and all areas of policy except for education will be subject to budgetary cuts”. In other words, all the other election promises gilding the Greens’ programme will either have to cost nothing or be sacrificed to the cutbacks.

Thilo Sarrazin, the extreme right-wing polemicist, was responsible for the austerity measures in Wowereit’s Senate for seven years. In 2009, he moved into the executive board of the Federal Bank and published his infamous diatribe against Muslim immigrants. The Greens’ austerity programme ties in with the heritage of Sarrazin. They are also intent on making savings at the expense of the poor and public services.

The manifesto thus specifically mentions “the provision and delivery of social benefits” as areas for potential savings. Jobs in the state administration are invoked as a further target for austerity measures. The Greens want to save €250 million annually through staffing cuts in this area alone.

Concerning tax revenue, however, only an additional €190 million is to be raised: €150 million by increasing business tax

and €40 million by a “city tax” on hotel accommodation. Whether these taxes are ever imposed, however, is highly questionable, with the manifesto expressly siding with the interests of the Berlin business community, which will do all it can to avoid a tax increase.

The manifesto goes out of its way to win the confidence of business circles and international investors. It states: “We want to convince not only tourists but also investors to come to Berlin. To this end we must praise our resources and present ourselves as a reliable partner. To promote Berlin as a green business location nationally and internationally—that will be a leading priority of a green mayor.”

To this end, the Greens want to adapt the Berlin administration to the needs of big business: “Berlin’s economy is creative—and the same must apply to Berlin’s administration. Modern economic management overcomes obstacles and helps people and businesses who want to improve this city.”

Elsewhere, the Greens offer Berlin business circles “a pact between business and labour”, promising: “We understand business as a partner with whom we can jointly develop something new.” In the past such pacts have always served as a mechanism for social attacks.

The Berlin city-state’s obligations to the banks are also sacrosanct for the Greens. Thus, the interest payments and existing yield commitments of the special investment funds that were responsible for the Berlin bank scandal, which cost millions in public funds, will not be touched.

Behind its linguistic sophistry, the right-wing character of the Greens’ election platform is also apparent in other passages. For example, the Greens want “to reconcile private and public money” in order to remedy the city’s financial crisis. This refers to private-public partnership projects, which are certainly not a new idea and have led in recent years to cities losing their municipal property amid dubious financial transactions.

The Greens intend to fund public enterprises through private investment and, “in exchange”, allow private sponsors a substantive say in the management of the co-financed projects. This model will lead to a further dismantling of democratic procedures, because whoever pays also determines the course that is taken. The Greens even reject the re-communalisation of public services, such as the Berlin water works, which was promised by the SPD-Left Party controlled Senate.

Another striking feature of the Greens’ programme is that it largely avoids polemicizing against the SPD and the CDU. One of these parties will be needed, after all, as a coalition partner.

The name of Sarrazin, which has stood for seven years of brutal austerity as well as for anti-Islamic rabble-rousing, is not mentioned. Instead, the Greens adapt themselves to the language of the extreme right. Renate Künast thus calls for migrants and their children “to try harder” to integrate into mainstream society. Within the Green party, she has also

pushed through her line on integration policy with remarks regarding “honour killings” and “large families prone to crime”.

The Greens’ increasing success in recent ballots should not be attributed to support for their right-wing programme. They are benefiting from the crises of other bourgeois parties and the lack of a progressive alternative within the working class.

The CDU and FDP are at odds in all major political issues at the federal level, having reached a record low in the survey polls. The CDU in Berlin has never recovered from the banking scandal that revealed a chasm of corruption and led to the fall of the last incumbent CDU mayor, Eberhard Diepgen, in 2001. Since then, the SPD and Left Party have enforced austerity measures against the working class, surpassing even those of the federal states ruled by conservatives, and giving Berlin the second-highest unemployment rate in Germany.

The resulting political vacuum is now being filled by the Greens. Its florid election manifesto has gained a measure of support because of widespread political confusion. It deliberately conceals the class issues by imposing so-called “human” issues, such as environmental protection, in the foreground.

Moreover, the Greens have core voters in wealthy, professional, middle-class circles, as well as in the “alternative” milieu of neighbourhoods like Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain. As far as the latter are concerned, the Greens stand primarily for an alternative lifestyle rather than a political programme.

However, the high-flying success of the Green Party can only be a temporary phenomenon. If they come into government, the gap between their out-of-touch programme and their actual policies will soon become evident. This makes the building of a socialist alternative within the working class all the more urgent. Otherwise, the risk will arise that the most right-wing forces will benefit from the inevitable disillusionment of those placing their hopes in the Greens.



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