

Growing poverty for children and youth in Berlin

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Ten years of rule by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party in Berlin has resulted in a huge increase in poverty for children and youth living in the German capital. More than 175,000 children and teenagers younger than 17 live in households dependent on miserly Hartz IV benefits—more than ever before. Half of these children are younger than eight years old and a large proportion live in a single parent family.

The districts of Neukölln, Berlin-Mitte, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Spandau-Mitte, Wedding, Moabit and Marzahn-Hellersdorf have the highest number of poor children and teenagers while poverty is growing faster than average in Gropiusstadt and Märkische Viertel.

The cause of the slide into poverty is almost universally the lack of employment of at least one parent. Since the SPD and Green coalition government introduced Hartz IV benefits, social decline has accelerated. The Hartz IV legislation means that those losing their jobs and failing to find a new one within one year must apply for Hartz IV benefits. The legislation also stipulates that if the accommodation of a recipient is larger than the stipulated size they are then required to find smaller accommodation.

This is bad enough for adults, but even worse for children and teenagers. Not only do they have to sacrifice their social environment, which is important in times of crisis, they also have to limit themselves in terms of space and often endure a tense domestic situation. They also have to relinquish things they have previously taken for granted: Parents invariably have no money for recreational activities such as going to a zoo or cinema, for excursions, holiday camps, music classes, membership in a sports association or additional tuition. The lack of such benefits can cause irreversible harm to childhood development.

In a study presented in June, Holger Ziegler, professor for educational science, writes that children who live in conditions of poverty carry a higher than average overall social burden. They face disproportionate discrimination, have experienced alienation on numerous occasions and suffer from particularly low self-esteem. Fellow author

Bernd Siggelkow, founder of the child and teenage institution the Ark, added that socially disadvantaged children could not make full use of their potential because of the demands made in the struggle for survival. The pressure to become independent at a very early age stifled the development of self-esteem.

Poverty in childhood causes problems that can last a lifetime. Someone denied social and cultural encouragement as a child will find it hard to fully participate in social life as an adult. In many cases, the foundations for a life in poverty are established in childhood.

According to city sociologist Hartmut Häußermann, who developed a monitoring program for the Senate, the situation of poor children in Berlin has clearly deteriorated during the tenure of the SPD/Left Party coalition.

Anger is growing on the part of victims. Natascha G., single mother of three living in Moabit, complains, “It is getting more difficult every year. Everything gets more expensive—rent, utilities, food—but we who receive Hartz IV are given just an additional €5 a month”.

Melanie D., mother of two from Berlin-Mitte, whose husband has been unemployed for four years, is particularly angry at “how politicians depict such pittance as a huge help”. The lunch at her children’s school, for which she used to receive €40 a month, is now subsidised with €17. “A total of €17 for our children”, she complains, “while those in parliament are discussing whether their allowances will rise twenty-fold or forty-fold!”

Teenagers from all parts of the city are also highly critical about the situation regarding recreational facilities. “There is less and less in the way of recreational alternatives”, said Moritz D., a 15-year-old attending school in Wilmersdorf. He lives with his unemployed father after his parent’s divorce, and spends most of his spare time in youth clubs.

Moritz is proven right by statistics. In Berlin-Mitte, for example, 54 youth recreational facilities existed in 2009; now this number has shrunk to 44. Twenty employees were laid off and the number of places available fell from 4,459 to 3,964—even though they are legally required to provide

places for 18 percent of the overall demand, i.e., three times the actual number.

In the district of Lichtenberg, funds for youth recreational facilities were cut by more than 10 percent. The youth club Die Linse, whose focus is on music and theatre projects, had to lay off its break dance teacher, and in order to save the stage technician's job, three full-time employees reduced their own working hours.

In Marzahn-Hellersdorf, a new concept for orchestra projects came into effect April 1, 2011, that will radically cut funds for the youth symphony orchestra. The orchestra, which has existed since 2005, has undertaken a series of widely praised projects, including a concert at the Berlin Philharmonic.

Recreation and culture are not the only areas where funds are being cut. The district authority of Neukölln has cancelled the contracts of 60 publicly funded institutions, including projects involved in youth welfare. This includes 14 so-called school stations that give support to children and teenagers if they have problems in school or their private lives. Other projects organise training courses, activities in the field of prevention of violence, or run youth recreational facilities.

Support for disabled students has also been curtailed. Schools that have long integrated many children with special needs will lose one or two teacher posts. In Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, the Heinrich-Zille Elementary School and the Fläming-Elementary School will be affected. According to the teachers union GEW, more than 10 teacher posts are unoccupied in all districts, even though they are entitled to these posts due to the number of children with educational needs. In Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, 22 positions are unoccupied, 21 in Tempelhof-Schöneberg and 19 in Reinickendorf.

The SPD/Left Party Senate's budget plan draft for 2012 includes another measure that will be just as far-reaching: massive cuts in child welfare. In spite of increasing use of counselling, crisis interventions and children taken into official charge (5.8 percent more than in the previous year), cuts will be in the six-digit range.

All of this is happening in the capital of a country that, between 2000 and 2010, has lowered corporate taxes by 21.8 percent and has reduced maximum tax rates from 56 percent in the 1980s to the current rate of 42 percent. It is happening in the capital of a country that abolished capital taxes in 1997, drastically reduced corporate inheritance taxes in 2010, and since January 2010 has lowered Value Added Tax for hoteliers from 19 to 7 percent.

Confronted with the situation in the youth and social services, politicians in district authorities and those responsible within the SPD/Left Party Senate continually

give the same response answer: "sacrifices" have to be made due to the financial situation.

But austerity and cuts affect mainly children and youth, the unemployed, the socially weak and the poorest of the poor. On the other hand, the SPD/Left Party Senate has made far-reaching concessions and generous financial gifts to big corporations and the rich, to banks and investors. In other words: a huge redistribution of social wealth is taking place.

The Left Party is playing a particularly cynical role, in the person of Carola Bluhm, senator for integration, labour and social policy. At many events, she talks about the city's social misery and expresses her grief about the closure of youth clubs, sports facilities and district libraries. But it is her office that decides upon austerity measures and forces districts to close down important social institutions.

Confronted with this contradiction, Bluhm routinely claims that she was forced to act by "practical constraints". A significant contributor of these "practical constraints" is Economics Senator Harald Wolf, who is also a Left Party member. He hands out financial gifts to the companies and banks, which he terms "incentives for companies to set up in Berlin". As the deputy to the city mayor, he is also responsible for maintaining good relations with Berlin's super-rich and high society.

After 10 years of participating in the Berlin government, it is clear there is nothing to separate the Left Party from other bourgeois parties. However, it adds a new dimension to the general political hypocrisy: wherever the Left Party is in opposition, its officials seek to act as the poor man's defenders and claim to represent the interests of the poor and the weak.

All of their leftist phrases and social promises are in fact nothing but political window-dressing. The Left Party defends the capitalist market economy and considers its main task to keep the growing resistance to austerity politics under control. Its officials are part of the ruling elite, with high wages and enjoying the benefits and privileges they gain through their government jobs.

In return, they use all of their political energy to defend the interests of those who benefit from this system—even against poor children and teenagers when necessary.



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