

Berlin state election: Greens want more cuts

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20 August 2011

The Green Party's integration into the political establishment has been marked by a continuous shift to the right. In 1985, Green leader Joschka Fischer swore his oath as the Green Party's first ever state minister wearing sneakers and an open shirt. Now he is a highly paid business consultant and his party is well received in the pinstriped circles of big business and the banks.

In the Berlin state election the Greens have pledged to toughen up the austerity policies introduced by the city's Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Left Party coalition. The traditional conservative camp is trailing in Berlin. The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has been registering just over 20 percent support for months, while the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) is not expected to cross the 5 percent hurdle necessary for representation in the Berlin House of Representatives. With the Social Democrats also lacking support, the Greens in Berlin are increasingly assuming the role of frontrunners in the conservative, bourgeois camp.

Last fall it even looked as if the top candidate of the Greens, former federal Consumer Protection Minister Renate Künast, would replace Klaus Wowereit (SPD) as city mayor. The Japanese nuclear disaster in Fukushima and the electoral success of the Greens in the southern state of Baden-Württemberg, where they took over the post of state premier for the first time, seemed to have given the Greens a new lease of life. In the meantime, however, it is unlikely that the Greens will take over from the SPD as the party with the most support.

Recent surveys show the SPD at 31 percent, while the Green Party has dropped from its peak of 29 percent in May this year to just 22 percent. This puts them on a par with the CDU, which also registers 22 percent. The Left Party polls 12 percent support, placing a question mark over its current coalition with the SPD. Nine percent of voters have indicated they would support other parties. This means, at the moment, that the most likely outcome of the election on September 18 will be either a coalition

of the SPD with Greens, or a coalition between the CDU and the Greens.

In mid-June Renate Künast indicated she preferred a ruling coalition with the SPD, but the Greens have still not made a firm decision. On the crucial issues of austerity and economic policies, laid down in the Green Party election program, there is broad agreement with the line of the CDU and the FDP. Compared to the election results of 2006, it is striking that the increase in support for the Greens has been mainly at the expense of the FDP.

The focus of the Green Party election program is the demand for tougher cuts together with complaints about the lack of fiscal discipline. On their web site they accuse the SPD-Left Party Senate of failing to live up to their promise to save "until it squeaks". The Greens are participating in the election in order to intensify the cuts orgy carried out over the last 10 years. To this end every aspect of social life is to be examined. The Green Party program states: "Berlin can no longer afford its debts. Green budget and fiscal policy is looking at the whole picture."

The claims by creditors on the State of Berlin now total more than €60 billion. In order to insure that this money is raised all of the established parties have subordinated themselves to the dictates of the banks. They are supporting unprecedented cuts in social and cultural areas, as well as cuts to the salaries of public service workers.

The Greens are refusing before the election to name the specific areas they propose cuts be made. They have only specified one of their aims. In cooperation with the trade unions they want to axe more public service jobs. Their web site declares: "Specifically we have unnecessary administrative costs and are examining a more efficient distribution of work involving staff levels."

Education is also likely to suffer should the environment party take power in Berlin—even if the party program says otherwise. The Greens praise the school reform already carried out by the Senate as "fundamentally well

intentioned” and “the right idea”. They merely criticize its implementation, i.e., teachers are confronted with half-baked concepts and angry parents, the Senate had lost public support, and school buildings are in a dilapidated condition. The party says nothing about the cuts in teaching positions and salaries, which together with other cuts in the sphere of education have led to catastrophic conditions in Berlin schools.

In order to prepare voters for the type of severe austerity policies favored by the Greens, Renate Künast told the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper August 5 that the party’s aims would require much imagination under conditions where cash will be scarce in the coming years. According to Künast, “The days when politics was just made with money are over”.

It is not only in the field of stringent austerity measures that the Greens are leading the way. In their election manifesto they openly declare themselves to be the best party to defend the interests of both small and big businesses. They boast of their close connection with so-called “green industries” and promise that they can align industry and business more easily than the CDU or SPD when it comes to playing the leading role in the renewable energy market.

The Greens also encourage international companies to invest in Berlin. In its election manifesto the party states: “The first thing we want to overcome is economic passivity. A new Senate must do everything to make Berlin the city of the ‘green economy’.” To this end they want to improve the business environment. Here too the Greens want to build on the policies of the SPD and Left Party, which have tried to make the city attractive to profiteers by enforcing low wages and precarious working conditions.

When it comes to privatization the Greens are clearly in the camp of the neo-liberals. The party’s main credo for public service is that it must meet up to the “economic expectations of the employers”. They refuse to buy back the Berlin Water Utility, which was privatized by the current Senate, and will determine the fate of sections of Europe’s biggest hospital, the Berlin Charité, on the basis of criteria relating to profitability. Under conditions where further cuts are inevitable, this means the closure of hospital facilities and job cuts.

While accusing the Senate of making insufficient cuts, the Greens also lambaste the SPD and the Left Party for

destroying the “inner unity” of the city. They level the same complaint at the CDU. According to the Greens these parties have sought to preserve their privileged positions and that of their clientele in a deeply divided society.

For their part, however, the Greens have no program to overcome the ongoing social polarization. The austerity measures they propose would only deepen social divisions in the city. Instead the Greens glorify the cultural diversity of Berlin. This is why their main campaign slogan is “A City for All”. Social and class issues are deliberately replaced by culture and lifestyle issues.

Green campaign posters carry the slogans: “A city for Soya and Solyanka, a city of kofta and meatballs, a city for techno pop and Wagner”. If the Greens were really honest they would put on their posters: “A city for welfare recipients and millionaires”.

The Greens use lifestyle issues in order to mobilize layers of the middle-class. In this respect they differ from the CDU, which finds its voters amongst older conservative retirees. The Greens are able to attract sections of the petty bourgeoisie under the banner of ecology, anti-nuclear power, and feminism. When in office, they carry out policies consistently in favor of big business and the banks—just like the rest of the established parties.

In a city like Berlin, which is culturally diverse and home to large immigrant communities, the CDU, with its emphasis on public safety and German culture, is ill suited to enforce the interests of the wealthy and property owners. With their focus on lifestyle and ecology issues the Greens are better placed to lead the social attacks on the working class. The former junior partner of the SPD, with its roots in the ’68 protest movement, has become the leading bourgeois party in Berlin.



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