

# SPD-Left Party state government in Brandenburg, Germany passes austerity budget

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Last week, the state government in Brandenburg, Germany set its two-year budget for 2013 and 2014. For the first time, the so-called “red-red” coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party has proposed a budget (for 2014) without any new loans. The debt ceiling enshrined in the constitution prohibits states from taking on any new debts after 2020. Brandenburg has thus exceeded the requirements of the debt ceiling.

The balanced budget has been achieved by cutting several thousand jobs in the public sector, making cuts in education and culture, expanding jobs with insecure working conditions and closing schools, museums and libraries.

The “red-red” coalition in Brandenburg has been in office since 2009, and the two parties have 60 percent of the seats in the state legislature (33 percent for the SPD and 27 percent for the Left Party). Prior to this, Minister-President Matthias Platzeck (SPD) had ruled for seven years with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The change in the coalition, from SPD-CDU to SPD-Left Party altered nothing about the state government's policies. The spending cuts in social and educational provisions have continued. In November 2009, Platzeck praised his new coalition partners when talking to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “There was a constructive climate even in our exploratory talks,” he said. “The talks were centered on the matters at hand, and both sides realize that hard years awaited.”

There were hard years, for the working class. More than 4,000 jobs have been cut in the public sector. By 2014, another 2,500 will be eliminated, with a further 1,500 by 2018. Of the 51,000 jobs when the “red-red”

coalition came to office, only 43,000 will be left. The cuts could worsen dramatically should the billions in subsidies from the state fiscal equalization scheme disappear for Brandenburg, as demanded by the Bavarian Christian Social Union.

The lead in the austerity measures has been taken by the Left Party, with Helmuth Markov as minister of finance.

Since the coalition agreement had originally foreseen the elimination of 11,000 jobs, the Left Party is celebrating the slightly lower job losses as a “success.” In an interview with the pro-Left Party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, the party's financial spokesman Christian Görke defended the job and spending cuts as “Investing in the Future”: “The red-red state government is keeping firmly to their consolidation course using its social judgment under an increasingly difficult fiscal environment.”

According to Görke, approximately 530 new teachers will be recruited by 2018. During the election campaign in 2009, however, the Left Party had called for “at least 2,500” new teachers, and even during the coalition negotiations they were speaking about 1,250 new teaching positions by 2014.

Now, instead, the state security apparatus is being beefed up. The number of police cadets is increased in the new budget. By 2018 there will be 7,350 police officers in the state's employ. There are 400 new posts planned in the finance department and 400 in the justice department. This is so the “courts and prosecutors can respond to future developments and set needs-based priorities,” Görke explained.

The recruitment of 530 new teachers over the course of six years, in a state with a population of 2.5 million,

is nothing more than a fig leaf. After many declarations that there would be no cuts in education and at the expense of future generations, the coalition reduced education spending in December 2011. They cut €12 million at the universities, €13 million in public schools and €4.3 million at free schools. According to the *Potsdamer Neuesten Nachrichten*, the finance ministry is already working on new plans for cuts for 2015.

The cuts at the universities have gone through even though the number of students in Brandenburg has increased from 35,000 to 51,000 in the past ten years. In a contribution made on *Deutschlandfunk* radio, Maja Wallenstein of the Coalition for Education and Science said: “Whatever the statistics, whether it is based on spending per student or whether it is on spending per head of population, Brandenburg is always in last place.”

According to Günther Fuchs, chair of the Union for Education and Science (GEW), in the past 20 years, one in two elementary and secondary school has been closed or faces closure. This trend was not reversed under the current government, but merely slowed down. In April 2011, state Education Minister Martin Münch (SPD) announced the closure of all special schools in Brandenburg by 2019.

The SPD-Left Party government has also cut in the cultural sphere. Museums and libraries have been closed, prices raised or opening times shortened.

The government's harsh policy of social cuts contrasts with its determination to repay interest and debts to the banks. In the 2010 financial year, Brandenburg's debts amounted to nearly €18.7 billion, or €7,442 per inhabitant. This has risen to more than €19 billion today. This contrasts with an annual budget of around €10.5 billion. To repay the debt, the state would have to hand over the equivalent of two year's complete budgets to the banks and creditors. The annual interest payments to banks amount to €628 million. This is more than the state budget items for higher education and culture combined.

The social situation in Brandenburg is catastrophic after three years of a “red-red” government. According to the German Union Federation (DGB), 280,000 of the state's 2.5 million inhabitants are in atypical employment. Fourteen percent of the population survive on less than €700 a month.

On its website, the Left Party admits that “many from

Brandenburg have unprotected working conditions and receive wages below the subsistence level.” In 2012, 12.9 percent of the population in Brandenburg received minimum social security benefits. The poverty rate is 13.6 percent. Official unemployment is 10 percent. The widespread poverty has led to a serious decline in the population—of up to 25 percent in Schwedt and 16 percent in Eberswalde, two of the state's major towns.

The Left Party's three years in government in Brandenburg show that the decade of continual cuts by the “red-red” coalition in the Berlin city government was not an exception. It refutes all those political tendencies that claim the Left Party could be pushed to serve the interests of working people. The opposite is the case: The Left Party is one of the biggest obstacles in the struggle against capitalism, against cuts and redundancies.



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