

Brandenburg teachers protest state education policies

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On November 2, 11,000 of the nearly 17,000 teachers who work in the German state of Brandenburg staged a protest against the education policies of the state's administration—a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party.

The teachers, who are denied the right to strike, also actively intervened in staff meetings of the six regional boards of education in the east German cities of Brandenburg, Cottbus, Eberswalde, Frankfurt, Luckenwalde and Neustadt. It was the first time in more than 20 years that teaching did not take place in Brandenburg's public schools due to a labour dispute.

The reason for the protests is the continuous deterioration of the conditions for teachers, who teach around 268,000 students in some 870 schools. Compared to their counterparts in west Germany, the teachers earn up to €800 (US\$1,040) less per month. Their average age is 54 years.

The teachers complain particularly of overcrowded classrooms and an intolerable workload, especially in the Berlin area. Teachers must teach for 28 hours in primary schools and 26 hours in secondary schools. Sickness among teachers is reaching record levels. The number of teachers relieved of duty due to long-term sickness stands at 500, which is equivalent to the number of reserve teachers—i.e., 3 percent of the total staff. With sickness and absenteeism by teachers averaging 8 percent of the total workforce, the remaining staff are frequently called upon to work unpaid overtime.

The protesting teachers oppose the announcement by the state administration that it plans to recruit an additional 2,000 teachers by 2014. They claim this is insufficient because many teachers will soon go into retirement due to the aging of the teaching workforce. In addition, the teachers are demanding the reintroduction of

their Christmas bonus, the elimination of bureaucratic obstacles, better career opportunities and the recruitment of young teachers on the basis of open-ended contracts. The Christmas bonus, amounting to €600, is paid in nearby Berlin, but was cancelled in Brandenburg three years ago.

Teachers' anger is directed against the SPD-Left Party state government headed by Premier Matthias Platzeck. Since taking office three years ago, the administration has imposed a rigorous austerity programme in the sphere of education and culture. The SPD-Left Party coalition has already closed a number of museums and libraries and plans to merge a number of colleges in the region, despite a popular initiative that has collected more than 42,000 signatures to protest the decision.

In July, the state administration approved its two-year budget for the years 2013/2014 and made clear that it intends to step up its current austerity policy. Although the constitutionally anchored debt brake prohibits states from taking up new debt starting in 2020, the new budget for Brandenburg provides for no new borrowing for the year 2014, thus making another round of cuts inevitable.

Exempt from the austerity measures are the interest payments made by the state to banks and credit institutions. The state of Brandenburg has a total debt of €19 billion and pays €628 million a year in interest payments on this sum. In contrast to education sector spending, these payments to the banks are considered sacrosanct.

The Left Party is playing a particularly heinous role. In its 2009 election campaign, the party demanded “more opportunities and better education for all” and expressed its outrage at the outgoing government for “numerous school closures”, “teacher shortages and cancelled lessons” and “fiscal consolidation at the expense of our

children”. These statements, however, proved no obstacle to the party agreeing to a coalition pact with the SPD immediately after the election, which made a clear commitment to the EU Lisbon Treaty and the austerity policies dictated from Brussels.

The Left Party’s commitment to these policies is not only evident in the sphere of education. The new coalition promised in 2009 to increase public service employment by 15,000 jobs. In fact, just 10 percent of this total has been realised, while 4,000 jobs have fallen away in the same period. The proportion of employees in mini-jobs and part-time and temporary work in Brandenburg has reached an all-time high of 36 percent under the SPD and Left Party. The number of temporary workers has increased by 13 percent in the space of one year—from 2010 to 2011.

The state’s commitment to terminate lignite mining has also been placed on hold due to financial considerations. In response, Economy Minister Ralf Christoffers, with the support of the Left Party, has sought to attract investors for a project involving controversial CCS (carbon capture and sequestration) technology for the underground disposal of carbon dioxide—in defiance of election campaign promises.

In a similar manner to the Berlin Senate, where the SPD formed a coalition with the Left Party for a decade, the coalition in Brandenburg peddles all sorts of social reformist illusions prior to being elected. Once in power, both parties carry out policies entirely in line with the demands of banks and investors. Leading members of the coalition are compensated accordingly with well-paid administrative posts, generous retirement packages and lucrative seats on company boards—as in the cases of Economy Minister Ralf Christoffers and Finance Minister Helmut Markov, who both sit on the executive of the scandal-ridden Berlin Brandenburg Airport project.



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