

Germany: leading Left Party official praises Agenda 2010 reforms

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In the run up to this year's federal election, the Left Party is seizing every opportunity to prove its complete loyalty to the German bourgeoisie. On March 13 the party held discussions with the head of the domestic intelligence service, Hans-Georg Maassen, assuring him of their full support.

At the beginning of March, Dietmar Bartsch, the deputy leader of the Left Party's parliamentary group, took part in two debates sponsored by the Cologne-based German Economic Institute (IW). The topic of the discussions was "ten years of Agenda 2010", the anti-welfare reform programme initiated by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party which formed a coalition government in 1998.

Bartsch first met with IW director Michael Hüther, a fervent proponent of the Agenda 2010 reforms, which have forced millions of workers into poverty and low paid jobs. One week later, as part of the "Berlin discussions", Bartsch debated with Wolfgang Clement, who played a leading role in drawing up the Agenda 2010 reforms and the accompanying Hartz laws which undermined welfare benefits, including support for the unemployed.

Clement was a "super-minister" in the SPD-Green government responsible for the economy and employment ministries. He has since left the SPD, criticising it from the right, and now supports the neoliberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). He sits on several boards of leading German businesses and has called for the elimination of legal restrictions on working after the retirement age of 67.

The very fact that Bartsch accepted the invitation of the IW to discuss the Agenda 2010 reforms with leading business figures like Hüther and Clement illustrates the social interests which Bartsch represents.

Bartsch made it unmistakably clear what lies behind the empty promises of the Left party in the federal election campaign referring to social justice and a "social

Agenda". Along with his discussion partners Bartsch defended the Agenda 2010 reforms as necessary measures, in order to get the country's problems under control.

He explained: "Viewed historically, it is a fact that Germany at that time had big problems. There was an increase and stabilisation of unemployment, at its high point mass unemployment reached 5 million. And the chances for those out of work to get back in to the job market worsened."

The Schröder government saw these problems, said Bartsch and had done "a lot of things wrong, but not everything." The Agenda 2010 did not have "just negative results" and to claim otherwise was "absurd".

One positive consequence of the reforms, according to Bartsch was the integration of unemployment and social benefits. "This reform certainly made sense," Bartsch declared. The nominal rate of unemployment had seen a "relative" decline. At the same time the divisions between rich and poor had increased. The assertion that Hartz IV had legalised poverty was "essentially correct."

Bartsch's remarks demonstrate the utter cynicism of the Left Party. He recognises that "essential" the Hartz IV reforms have "legalised poverty", but at the same time claims that these measures were necessary and positive, thereby justifying the poverty enacted by these laws.

His positive estimation of the integration of social welfare and unemployment benefits underscores this. The elimination of unemployment benefit ensured that after twelve months, those out of work no longer had a right to social support. The miserly unemployment benefit II, known to the population as Hartz IV, amounts to just 382 Euros per month and is only available when all of the recipient's savings have been exhausted.

The Hartz IV laws forced workers to accept any job on any terms, even when the work was well below their level of qualification and the income far lower than their

previous employment. This led to a dramatic rise in poverty levels and has been used, together with the creation of a legal framework for temporary work and other kinds of precarious employment, to create the largest low-wage sector in Western Europe.

As a consequence of the Hartz reforms, over 4 million workers in Germany earn less than 7 euros per hour. The number of workers in temporary employment has trebled over the past ten years to 900,000, with three out of every four of these jobs involving pay below the low wage threshold. Under the pressure of the low wage sector and with the help of the trade unions, real wages have declined by 4.8 percent over the past five years. In the lower income groups the decline has been even higher, at over 10 percent.

Responding to the question as to whether he agreed with the Left Party's demand to ban temporary working, Bartsch said, "I have a slightly different view on that."

Bartsch's remarks show that the support given by the Left Party to the SPD's candidate for Chancellor, Pier Steinbrück, is no accident. The Left Party supports Steinbrück, who is an outspoken defender of Agenda 2010, not despite but rather because of his right-wing anti-social politics.

Dietmar Bartsch is not an unknown in the Left Party. He is in an open advocate of the right-wing politics of the Left Party, which has implemented the brutal Hartz IV measures wherever it has assumed governmental responsibility at the regional level.

In 1989, Bartsch was a co-founder of the successor party to the SED (Socialist Unity party), the former state party in East Germany, after having been a SED member for 12 years. In 1991 he became a member of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) executive, occupied the post of federal party whip for several years and led a number of the party's election campaigns.

He was always an energetic defender of the PDS's participation in regional government in the former East German states. The setback suffered by the PDS at the 2002 elections saw him temporarily retreat in to the background. He left the party executive and became a management consultant. During this time he made headlines with the remark that he never again wanted to earn as little as a deputy in the Bundestag.

Only three years later, he returned to the Bundestag and the leadership of the Left Party, which emerged after the introduction of the Hartz reforms through a merger of the PDS with the Election Alternative group (WASG), a split-off from the SPD. He headed the party's election

campaign in 2009. Last year, the Left Party threatened to break apart following a leadership disagreement between two of its main co-founders, Oscar Lafontaine and Bartsch. Neither was prepared to serve as the deputy in the party with the other as leader.

In the bourgeois press, the differences were reduced to those between a right-wing faction of the party led by Bartsch and a more left-wing tendency led by Lafontaine. In reality the conflict had nothing to do with political principles, but was rather driven by the haggling of rival factions within the party over power and influence.

In recent weeks, Left Party figures, including their leading candidate in the federal election Gregor Gysi, and the joint party leaders Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping, have declared their readiness to support Steinbrück as future chancellor and form a coalition government with the SPD and Greens. Lafontaine and his partner and close political ally Sarah Wagenknecht joined in this chorus of appeals.

Ten years after the introduction of Hartz IV, the views of Bartsch are the official programme of the Left Party. One of the first decisions made by Riexinger and Kipping when they became joint leaders last autumn was to cease campaigning with the slogan "Hartz IV must go!"

Under conditions of enormous social tension in Germany, the Left Party is demonstrating to ruling circles its readiness to implement measures like Hartz IV on a federal level, as part of an alliance with Steinbrück to prepare massive new attacks on the working class.



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