

Germany: SPD-Green coalition imposes massive spending cuts with support of Left Party

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Since the local elections in 2009, the Left Party has supported the pro-business policies and brutal social cuts being implemented in Duisburg. Together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party, their six council members form a so-called “budget consolidation coalition”.

This half-million inhabitant metropolis is one of the cities in the Ruhr area with the highest levels of unemployment and poverty. In June over 31,000 people were registered unemployed, with 25,000 of these in receipt of welfare. The official unemployment level is running at 12.7 percent; in addition there are some 41,000 who are under-employed, people who only work part-time or in so-called “mini-jobs”, although they want to work full-time.

In 2011, unemployment was 23.5 percent, reducing almost a quarter of Duisburg’s inhabitants to poverty. A study by the Economic and Social Science Institute (WSI) in November last year noted in relation to Duisburg that one could observe how “an entire city” became poor.

This situation is not simply the result of decades of decline in the coal and steel industries traditionally associated with this region, as politicians and the media claim. Rather, it is the outcome of deliberate policies conducted at the state and federal level, which have driven many municipalities into high levels of debt.

Duisburg is one of 34 highly indebted cities obliged under the North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) state “support pact law” to implement restructuring programmes. Two years ago, the NRW state executive under Hannelore Kraft (SPD) passed the “city finance support pact law”, which provides funding for indebted cities, but which in return obliges them to undertake massive cuts.

Duisburg receives €52 million annually up to 2016 from this “support pact”, with the level then dropping to zero

by 2021, on condition that the city is operating a balanced budget. In return, the city must find annual savings of €82 million.

At local level, this policy of cuts and savings, which is directed against the basic needs of ordinary working people, is being implemented by the SPD-led city council. The exception was 2004-2009, when the Christian Democratic Union (CSU) was in power in city hall. Since 2009, the SPD has been back in charge, with the support of the Greens and Left Party, and is responsible for carrying out these attacks.

Hermann Dierkes, who has been a leader of the Left Party’s faction on the city council for 13 years, justified support for the cuts and savings measures in Duisburg at a party conference in February this year.

Before joining the Left Party’s predecessor, the misnamed Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), Dierkes was a long-standing member of the Pabloite United Secretariat’s German offshoot, the United Socialist Party (VSP). Now he argues like any other right-wing bourgeois politician: “In June last year, following months of consultation, we voted with the consolidation coalition for the 2012 city budget, and so for a budget restructuring plan to reduce the deficit of around €118 million step by step.”

Dierkes justified the job cuts in the city administration, saying, “The reduction in the administration, at a level of 689 posts in our shrinking city, will be undertaken without any compulsory redundancies.” Natural wastage and demographics, that is the aging workforce, were enough to achieve the level of cuts desired, he added with unconcealed cynicism.

Dierkes’ successor as chair of the Left Party faction on the city council, Martina Ammann, added her voice to the party’s support for budget consolidation in a speech in

mid-March. The Left Party was determined, she said, to carry on with the budget consolidation within the framework of the coalition and in close collaboration with the mayor, Sören Link (SPD).

Ammann said, “We are conscious that this budget cannot be implemented without pain, in order to achieve the legal requirement for a balanced budget by 2016.” She explicitly justified a further hiking of the local property tax from 2013, bringing €16 million in additional revenues, although it is clear that most landlords would simply shift this onto rents, which in turn would push up the costs to the state for accommodation for those in receipt of welfare.

While the cuts and savings will affect a large part of the population, the members of the Left Party on the city council have no scruples; big business is happy for the support of the Left Party for their own plans and projects.

One of these projects is the retail “Factory Outlet Centre” (FOC), planned for north Duisburg. To create this, an entire area that currently contains the Rhein-Ruhr Halls is going to be demolished, including a large multi-purpose facility, a swimming baths and the Zinkhüttensiedlung housing estate. The land will then be sold to a group of investors, who will construct the massive Factory Outlet Centre on it.

The first to protest against this plan have been the residents of the Zinkhüttensiedlung housing estate, who face being driven out of their homes, in which some of them have lived for decades. Small retailers in the city centre and other parts of the district also fear the new shopping centre will adversely affect trade and have raised their concerns.

Not so the Left Party in Duisburg. They support this proposition as a “great opportunity for north Duisburg”. Hermann Dierkes spoke out against the protests, saying that one had to support everything in Duisburg that created jobs. He knows full well the greater part of the jobs that will arise from the project are low-wage and part-time, and that other jobs will also disappear. Dierkes is pursuing his own interests. He is a member of the FOC Advisory Commission, tasked with implementing the project. In addition, he is a supervisory board member of the Duisburg Utility and Transport Company.

The right-wing policies of the Left Party have even provoked internal opposition. For example, Sylvia Brennemann resigned from the party in protest, and has since become spokesperson for the Zinkhütteplatz Initiative, which is organizing some 150 families in opposition to being removed from their homes.

According to a report in the WAZ newspaper, at a Left Party meeting in mid-June called to discuss the balance sheet of the work of the party’s city council faction, Hermann Dierkes justified himself against the criticism of working too closely with the SPD and Greens. His critics, Dierkes shouted, “have not understood how local politics works” when they reproach the SPD or Greens about the trade tax, welfare policies or the Afghanistan war.

Another project is the planned green belt around the ThyssenKrupp steel plant in Duisburg Bruckhausen. The measure, which is being sold as an environmental improvement, means the demolition of numerous houses in the Bruckhausen district, which has already begun. The demolition and later construction of the park is being financed with €72 million from ThyssenKrupp and funds from the European Union. The Duisburg Development Society is responsible for implementation. Here too, pressure and threats are being employed to drive tenants from their homes and force owners to sell.

While some properties in the district are in need of renovation, the measures being implemented are directed at creating land for investments.

Last September, a report on Deutschlandradio about the destruction of historic buildings—Bruckhausen is one of the oldest districts in the city—depicted the absolute unscrupulousness of the city authorities in implementing their plans, including using intimidation against those who did not acquiesce voluntarily.

The anti-social policies of the SPD-Green Party-Left Party coalition in Duisburg are above all directed against working people. This also applies to poor immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania, above all Sinti and Roma, who are denied any access to social benefits.



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