

Coalition negotiations in German state of Hesse

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1 October 2013

A balance of forces emerged from the September 22 state election in Hesse similar to that in the federal election that took place on the same day. As a result, the state's negotiations over a coalition have considerable significance for federal politics. A possible coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Left Party would not only set a precedent for a coalition on the federal level, it would also provide an important base for the social attacks of the next German government.

Although the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) was just able to enter the state parliament with 5 percent of the vote, the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU's) result of 38.3 percent meant that the previous ruling coalition (CDU and FDP) lost its majority. The same coalition possibilities have emerged as exist at a national level. The CDU could govern with the SPD, which received 30.7 percent, or the Greens, with 11.1 percent. In addition, a coalition between the SPD, Greens and Left Party (5.2 percent) is possible.

The social contradictions across the whole of Germany are concentrated on a smaller scale in Hesse. While Frankfurt is home to the largest banking district of continental Europe, in Kassel and Rüsselsheim there are important industrial factories. Along with privileged petty bourgeois areas in the south, the north is dominated by impoverished rural regions.

This concentration of social contradictions has seen Hesse previously used as a testing ground for new governing coalitions, which were then later implemented at a federal level. The first SPD/Green government was formed in Hesse in 1985 under Holger Börner, who had spoken out vehemently against such a coalition only weeks before the election. Trial runs also occurred in Berlin, Lower Saxony and Saxony Anhalt, before the first federal SPD/Green coalition was finally

sworn in in 1998.

In 2009, the then leader of the Hesse SPD, Andrea Ypsilanti, tried for the first time in a state in western Germany to establish an SPD/Green coalition, which was tolerated by the Left Party. She failed due to the opposition of her own parliamentary fraction. Four years later, her successor, Torsten Schäfer-Gümbel, could have more success with this combination.

Although Schäfer-Gümbel opposed a coalition with the Left Party or a government tolerated by them in the election campaign for political reasons, he did not formally rule it out. In all of his statements since the election, he has been at pains to avoid ruling out cooperating with the Left Party, instead raising the differences that exist with the CDU.

The SPD in Frankfurt is openly calling for a state government to be formed with the cooperation of the Left Party. In Offenbach, the SPD decided that an SPD/Green/Left Party coalition would be preferable to a grand coalition.

The Left Party is the strongest advocate of such a coalition, as it is on the federal level. The party has declared itself willing to tolerate an SPD government or to participate in one. In the constellation that ultimately failed in 2009, the Left Party was the most reliable partner.

In an interview with the Berlin daily *TAZ*, the leading candidate of the Left Party, Janine Wissler, declared she was ready to make significant concessions. Her party was willing to accept a debt ceiling in the budget, Wissler explained.

The debt ceiling would commit the state to stricter measures to consolidate the budget. Schäfer-Gümbel had cited the rejection by the Left Party of such a ceiling as one of two hurdles in the way of a coalition. The second was the Left Party's opposition to the

expansion of Frankfurt airport.

The Greens have also indicated their acceptance of a coalition with the SPD and Left Party. However, some local politicians have spoken out in favour of a coalition with the CDU, as they have practiced in Frankfurt since 2006.

If an SPD/Green/Left Party coalition is established, or a government that is tolerated by the Left Party, it would take up a key position as a supporter for the new German government. The plans for mass layoffs, social cuts and a military build-up have long been prepared. Imposing them will meet with enormous social opposition.

The Left Party would be fully responsible for these attacks and would implement them at the state level. They would use their ties to the trade unions to do so, and mobilise the layers of the privileged middle class for which the party speaks. The party proved this in its 10-year coalition with the SPD in the Berlin state senate, in Mecklenburg-Pommerania, in Brandenburg and in North Rhine-Westphalia. In all of these states, the Left Party launched an assault on social services, attacked democratic rights and built up the state apparatus.

The Left Party's leading candidate would have the job of guaranteeing the stability of such a government. Wissler began her political career in the state capitalist group Linksruck (Keep Left), and is still a member of its successor organisation Marx 21. Together with the remaining members of Linksruck, she joined the WASG (Electoral Alternative for Social Justice), which combined with the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the former Stalinist party in East Germany) to form the Left Party in 2007.

Many members of the group were given high-ranking posts in the Left Party, after they had decisively opposed a faction in Berlin that demanded that the PDS exit the Berlin state government and sought to block the unification with the WASG to form the Left Party. Subsequently, members of Marx 21 have repeatedly noted the necessity of the Left Party participating in government.

Marx 21 specialises in covering for the most right-wing politics with a few left phrases, and mobilising layers of the petty bourgeoisie against the interests of the working class. This makes them extremely valuable for the future Hesse state government and as a prop for

the social attacks of the federal government.

While the Greens are seeking to appeal to the CDU, and the SPD wants to continue the Agenda 2010 reforms in a grand coalition, the Left Party is tying itself to both parties. The party does not intend to be left empty-handed when the government posts are parceled out, and intends to use them to defend the interests of its privileged clientele.



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