

Left Party supports budget cuts in German city of Duisburg

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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On November 11, the Left Party, along with the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens, adopted the so-called budgetary restructuring plan 2014 for the city of Duisburg. The plan confirms the course of austerity policies imposed by the Left Party/SPD/Green administration in recent years, and will impose even deeper social cuts on the population of around half a million.

Since March 2011, the Left Party has cooperated at a municipal level with the SPD and Greens to form the city administration. They have explicitly pursued the goal of restructuring the city, which is highly indebted and marked by high levels of unemployment and poverty.

Duisburg is one of the 34 cities required to present restructuring plans under the law for the reinforcement of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). Two years ago, the SPD state government for NRW, led by Hannelore Kraft, agreed to state financing for the reinforcement pact. Under the agreement, indebted cities receive money from the state, but in return have to make deep cuts.

Until 2016, Duisburg is to receive €52 million annually from this reinforcement pact. The contribution will subsequently decrease, until funding runs out in 2021 and a balanced budget is achieved. Until then, the city must make €82 million in annual savings in exchange for the support.

The Left Party made clear with its support for budgetary consolidation that it backs the SPD-Green state government, and that the party plays a central role in the brutal imposition of the cuts on the population.

The chairperson of the Left Party on the Duisburg city council, Martina Amman, declared in her speech on the budget on November 11: “As the Left fraction we will continue to streamline the budget in the

framework of cooperation and in close alliance with the mayor (Sören Link, SPD). The Left fraction is holding firm to its course in the cooperation agreement and will vote for the 2014 budget and the projections for the reorganisation plan.”

This is a blunt threat to the population of Duisburg. Prior to the adoption of the first plan to balance the budget in 2012, the city administration under Peter Langer (SPD) presented a list of cuts that, as he put it, placed everything under review.

According to a report by the *Bürgerzeitung Duisburg*, the so-called eye-watering list contains plans to shut five district libraries, cut funding for language, close the opera “Oper am Rhein,” close meeting halls and swimming pools, turn off the fountains, switch off streetlights at night, increase the property tax, increase charges for children’s daycare, cut benefits, reduce district representation, cut pregnancy consultancy, and end subsidies for associations supporting people with psychiatric problems.

In addition, between 680 and 700 jobs are to be cut from the city by 2021, another issue on which the Left Party, SPD and Greens have already agreed.

With the adoption of the 2014 budget, which projects intakes totalling €1.49 billion and spending of €1.52 billion, the deficit is to shrink to €26 million. The long-term debt which the city must pay back has been unchanged over the past three years at €1.7 billion.

The budget plans an increase in the property tax by 695 basis points, which will affect families with more children and the socially vulnerable. It is clear that the cost to most landlords will be passed on to renters and as a result the accommodation costs for claimants of the Hartz IV welfare benefits will increase.

Further attacks on public services and living standards, due next year, have been justified by the

SPD, Left Party and Greens on the basis of unanticipated expenditures.

As the city administration noted, the emergence of an additional €3.7 million in spending on care for children under three would mean that the youth department would have to make savings in exchange. Other spending on damage and insurance costs will be compensated for by increases in bus fares and through an increase in revenues from external work and traffic surveillance.

In attempting to justify these cuts the cynicism of the Left Party/SPD/Green administration knows no bounds. The cost for the public baths, which could not be closed down after strong protests, has been accounted for as additional expenditure. The residents of the city are to be forced to pay more for bus fares and other charges in order to finance cultural facilities such as public baths, the city theatre, and libraries.

In the imposition of these unpopular cuts, the Left Party is playing a decisive role. More than any other party, it is attempting to cover up its own cost-cutting policies or present them as “social cost-cutting” in order to weaken the opposition to the destruction of services.

Amman pointed to the introduction of a social pass in her speech praising the spending cuts, which is to provide discounted entry to low-wage earners and welfare claimants to public baths, museums, and theatres. In the same breath, she praised the work of welfare organisations, church communities and institutions such as Duisburger Tafel, which provide for the poor in the city.

This is cynicism of the highest order. The Left Party are providing the poor with a limited discount to cultural institutions in the city that they themselves intend to shut down. At the same time, the number of those living in poverty who are dependent on social support from churches and other institutions is rising due to the anti-social policies of the Left Party/SPD/Green administration.

By praising the social work of the church, Amman made clear that the Left Party is not prepared to create decent-paying jobs. Instead it is planning further attacks on social welfare.

The cost-cutting policies of the Left Party in Duisburg and many other municipalities underscore the right-wing bourgeois character of this party. Together

with the trade unions and other parties, the Left Party is taking on the task of organising the cuts already determined by politicians at the federal and state levels.

The fraction of the Left Party in Duisburg is composed of 36 members. Apart from the six members of the city council, there are district representatives, public members on specialist committees, and members of the boards of city-based companies like DVV-Holding, the Duisburg traffic association (DVG), the housing construction association (Gebag), the chamber of commerce and other businesses. In addition there are representatives in institutions of the Lehmbruck museum and the savings bank of an institute for housing for the elderly.

The members of the Left Party’s fraction occupy key positions in the political and economic life of the city and are a firm part of its political and business elite. Their social interests are in direct conflict with those of the working population.

This is underscored by a paper from the Left Party fraction entitled “A balance sheet of political work: two years of Left Party/SPD/Greens in the Duisburg city council.” It celebrated the cost-cutting of recent years as a great success.

While Duisburg has developed the highest levels of unemployment and poverty in the Ruhr region under the Left Party, SPD and Greens, the Left Party declare, “with cooperation we have been able to achieve important progress. For many years Duisburg has had acceptable budgets. It demands consideration and casualties, but no social destruction and privatisation.”

The Left Party leave no doubt about the fact that they are playing a central role with the trade unions in working out the planned cost-cutting measures. “In the cooperation agreement, we have been able to have sustained influence on municipal politics,” states the paper. “The long years of joint experience in the unions and works councils has also contributed to the success of the cooperation, especially between the Left Party and Social Democrats.”



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