

Berlin mayor resigns: The end of the era

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On December 11, 2014, Klaus Wowereit, the Social Democratic (SPD) mayor of Berlin, resigned after 13 years in office. The Wowereit era was marked by sharp social divisions, growing poverty and the further enrichment of the city's already wealthy upper class. Announcing his resignation, Wowereit declared: "I was mayor at the right time."

In fact, Wowereit proved invaluable to the German ruling class during a period of worsening international economic and political crisis. He was the architect of a state government that for the first time incorporated the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which later became the Left Party. From 2001 to 2011 Berlin was ruled by a so called "red-red" (SPD-Left Party) Senate, which enforced tough austerity measures in the face of broad popular resistance. The Senate's services were openly recognized by the media. One day after the Berlin election in 2011 *Zeit online* described the red-red coalition just voted out of office as "most likely the only conceivable one that could follow through and sustain such austerity measures." Any other constellation would have been confronted with "persistent protests by those affected..."

In the middle of 2001 Berlin's governing grand coalition led by Mayor Eberhard Diepgen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) broke up following a banking scandal, which had triggered huge popular outrage. The state's majority-owned Bankgesellschaft Berlin (BBS) group was on the brink of bankruptcy due to speculative financial transactions and dividend guarantees for privileged fund holders. One of the main people behind the scandal was former CDU chairman and CEO of the Berlin Mortgage and Bond Certificate Bank, Klaus-Rüdiger Landowski, a close confidant of Diepgen.

The election of Klaus Wowereit as mayor, after a no-confidence vote against Diepgen and the formation of the red-red state government from October 2001 onwards, coincided with the SPD-Green party government at a federal level under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party). The

government's move from Bonn to Berlin had already been in progress for some time following German reunification, and was accompanied by a more assertive German foreign and domestic policy.

For the first time since the end of World War II the German army actively participated in war, first in Yugoslavia and later in Afghanistan. The 9/11 attacks were followed by anti-terror campaigns and the buildup of police and intelligence agencies, while at the same time the anti-welfare Hartz laws led to a drastic intensification of social inequality, with severe consequences for the recently reunified city of Berlin, with already high levels of unemployment, especially in the eastern districts of the city.

The red-red Berlin government supported the policies of the federal SPD-Green Party government and its successor in all respects, proving to be a reliable partner and guaranteeing law and order in the capital.

Although the self-enrichment of the wealthy in Berlin had caused great outrage and contributed to the victory of the SPD and the PDS, the new Senate immediately guaranteed the repayment of the bankrupt BBS group's debt, allocating large sums from the state budget. Wowereit and his finance minister, Thilo Sarrazin, and Left Party economics minister Harald Wolf recouped the missing public funds from the population, by cutting billions in education, along with job and pay cuts and privatizations.

One of the first measures of the red-red administration was quitting the federal state's tariff community, which led in turn to massive pay cuts for public service employees. Furthermore, the Senate privatized water companies and sold off state-owned housing concerns to speculators, ended the funding of social housing, and closed numerous libraries, public swimming pools and cultural facilities.

The Hartz laws were implemented promptly and vigorously by the senator for social affairs, Heidi Knaake-Werner (PDS-Left Party). In 2006, Wowereit was appointed chair of the supervisory board of the Berlin-

Brandenburg GmbH Airport. After many years of delay, as the budget for the project has multiplied many times over, the airport has still not been completed.

During this time the Left Party, in alliance with the local trade unions, played a special role in gridlocking any resistance. The public service union Verdi and its small army of officials, who are members of either the Left Party or SPD, made sure that strikes by teachers, transport and health employees were regularly sold out. They in turn received political cover from a variety of pseudo-left groups, which promoted the red-red Senate as a left alternative to the grand coalition under Diepgen.

At the same time the red-red Senate increased funding for the police and security services, promoted the construction of a new enormous BND headquarters, and limited the right to demonstrate. By the time of the elections for the House of Representatives in 2011, illusions that the PDS had sought to arouse in 2001, that its coalition government with the SPD represented a “left turn,” were gone. The 22.6 percent of the votes that the PDS won in 2001 decreased to 11.7 percent in 2011. The red-red senate was voted out of office, and the discredited CDU returned to government.

Wowereit’s party and political career was bound up with the decline of the SPD. Since its return to government in 1998 under Gerhard Schröder, the SPD has been at the forefront of an increasingly aggressive foreign policy and brutal attacks on social rights, such as the German army operations in the former Yugoslavia and in Afghanistan, its support for the right-wing coup in the Ukraine, and the Hartz laws and the related Agenda 2010.

In order to distance Wowereit from these right-wing policies the media portrayed him as a charismatic politician from humble beginnings who was popular due to his folksy and often flippant remarks. Wowereit was proud of the description of the capital city which emerged under his regency—“poor but sexy”. His homosexuality was used to provide a certain liberal façade behind which brutal attacks on the social and political rights of the working class were carried out.

Better-off cultural layers, academics, media personalities, start-ups in the creative scene and the alternative economy, and the self-employed formed an important part of Wowereit’s social base. These groups hailed him as he implemented repressive measures against workers, Hartz IV recipients, refugees and minorities.

At the end of the Wowereit era, the number of millionaires is increasing, although many long-established West Berlin companies have withdrawn their

headquarters. According to the media the new layer of millionaires are mainly real estate speculators and the wealthy from other states, who have moved their retirement homes to the city of glamor and cultural events.

This is also Wowereit’s heritage, a man who continually sought to promote big spectacles and exhibitions, as well as the restoration of the iconic city palace of the German emperor at the site of the former East German Palace of the Republic.

On the other hand, more and more working families are facing a life in poverty. The unemployment rate remains high at 11 percent, and 17 percent of the population are dependent on miserly Hartz IV welfare benefits. In Berlin almost one in three children is considered poor and every seventh person is at risk of poverty.

According to the figures of the last poverty report, the poverty rate of 21.2 percent is well above the national average of 15.2 percent. The real estate boom is increasing rents dramatically and displacing people from their long time lodgings. Poverty among the elderly and the number of one-euro jobbers and low wage earners is increasing rapidly.

Before Wowereit left office he initiated the next tranche of even more ruthless budget cuts. On December 12, 2014, the day after his resignation, the SPD and CDU adopted a two-year budget for 2014-15, which for the first time makes it illegal for Berlin to take out new loans, thus enforcing the nationally agreed debt ceiling before its constitutional deadline. In recent discussions Wowereit proudly called it a “black zero” budget. The interests Wowereit represents and has always represented were exposed by the report that he is due to become a board member of Berlin’s Association of Berlin Merchants and Industrialists (VBKI). The press release claimed he is due to act “as an ambassador of Berlin’s economy.”

Workers and young people must draw the lessons of the Wowereit era. A red-red coalition is now being discussed as a model on a federal level, and on December 5 Bodo Ramelow became the first elected state premier of the Left Party in Thuringia. Workers can only expect an intensification of attacks on their social and democratic rights from such governments.



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