

One in seven children in Germany relies on social welfare

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7 June 2016

One in seven children under the age of 15 in Germany is dependent upon the Hartz IV welfare benefits received by their parents. In Bremen and Berlin almost one child in three is affected (31.5 percent).

These alarming figures come from data from the federal agency for labour for 2015 examined by parliamentary deputy Sabine Zimmermann (Left Party). According to the data, an average of more than 1.5 million children were dependent upon Hartz IV last year, 34,000 more than in the previous year. The difference in poverty rates between east and west is starkly visible. Whereas in eastern Germany 20.3 percent of children are affected, in the west the average is 13 percent.

But these figures by no means comprise all children who are reliant on state support and thus live below the poverty line. “There are a large number of children in addition,” said Hans Hilger from the German Alliance for the Protection of Children on Dom radio. If one includes the families not dependent on Hartz IV, but other benefits like child benefits or housing benefits, roughly 2.7 million children are affected.

It was a scandal, Hilger continued, that the state paid more for the children of the better-off than for those of the poor. Parents on an average income could cut their taxes by almost €300 thanks to the child tax rebate, but for the poor, child benefit of almost €200 is incorporated into the Hartz IV rate. According to Hilger, child poverty has roughly doubled since 2000.

The parents of these children are often single parents or long-term unemployed. *Der Spiegel* reported in an article on Hartz IV that an increasing number of people never make it out of the poverty trap.

More than a million adults have been claiming Hartz IV for more than nine years. This emerged in a response by the federal government to a question tabled in parliament by the Greens. This means that one in four Hartz IV claimants is expected to be permanently dependent on social welfare, presumably for the rest of their lives.

Behind these figures lurk senseless suffering and frustration millions of times over, for children, young people and their parents, as well as families, numerous pensioners and the unemployed. The rampant poverty rates are destroying any future perspective for an entire generation.

In *Der Spiegel's* report, a pensioner from Munich, who was formerly an engineer with a diploma, spoke about how he has to walk around with holes in his shoes because he lacks the funds to buy a new pair. “When it rains, it seeps through,” the magazine cited him as saying.

The Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband, a welfare organisation, classified over 15 percent of the population, or 12.5 million people, as poor in its last report, including around 3.4 million pensioners and more than 2.5 million children. These poverty figures are a devastating indictment of a wealthy society like Germany in the 21st century.

These horrendous figures are the direct product of the Hartz reforms and the “Agenda 2010” implemented 14 years ago by the Social Democrat-Green government (1998-2005) of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Deputy Chancellor Joschka Fischer. In collaboration with the trade unions, it initiated the largest social cuts in German history since the Second World War.

The Hartz laws have subsequently emerged as a model for

the whole of Europe. Similar or even worse social attacks have since taken place in Greece, Italy, Spain and France.

Currently in France, the Socialist Party government is enforcing a comparable labour market reform against the bitter opposition of the French working class. Two years ago, the initiator of the Hartz reforms, Peter Hartz, who gave his name to the laws, personally advised the Hollande government in the drafting of the reform. The result is the law named after labour minister Myriam El Khomri, which the Socialist Party rushed through parliament by decree and without a vote three weeks ago.

In Greece, several Social Democrats are collaborating with Syriza to enforce the dictates of the European Union. According to Greek media reports, Deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, Jörg Asmussen, state secretary in the labour ministry under SPD labour minister Andrea Nahles, and European Parliament President Martin Schulz are in close contact with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. In Greece, Syriza's brutal programme of cuts is provoking new strikes and protests.

The problem of child poverty has "been known for a long time," said the Left Party deputy Zimmermann as she presented the figures last Tuesday. "The federal government must finally deal with this problem in order to create a perspective for the children." There is a great deal of hypocrisy behind this critique.

The Left Party is no different from other parties on questions of social policy. From the Alternative for Germany, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, to the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party, all are agreed that in the crisis there is "no alternative" to cuts. The Left Party was the first party to support Syriza in Greece and they continue to back the Tsipras government today.

In Berlin, where nearly one in three children survives on Hartz IV payments, the Left Party, and its predecessor organisation PDS, sat in the state government from January 2002 to the end of 2011. During this time, social polarisation intensified more than anywhere else in Germany. The Social Democrat-Left Party state government imposed a ruthless austerity programme on the backs of the working class, and on the unemployed and socially vulnerable in particular. In Berlin, the conditions for the unemployed and Hartz IV claimants

deteriorated more sharply than in any other German state.

The Senate supported a large number of one euro (per hour) jobs and was heavily involved in hiking off the unemployed to private companies as low-wage or contract labourers. During the 10 years of the Social Democrat-Left Party government, the number of contract workers increased by 118 percent and the number of employees in the public sector was cut by a third.

The Senate sold public housing units to private investors and property developers, resulting in a massive increase in rents. Thousands of Hartz IV claimants were forced out of their apartments, because the decision-makers at the job centres determined that rent costs were too high.

It was precisely during this time that child poverty consolidated itself in socially explosive areas of Berlin. In this context, the Left Party's record on this is devastating. At the same time, the Social Democrat-Left Party government made massive cuts to universities and schools and eliminated the free provision of school textbooks. The access to the public services for school leavers was also made increasingly difficult.

Berlin is a perfect example of the fact that the Left Party's name is the only thing "left" about it. Whenever it has assumed government responsibility, it has been a driving force for social destruction. Their policies are no different from those of the SPD, with which it has been striving for years to form a governing coalition on the federal level.



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