

SEP candidate prevented from speaking at tenants' meeting in Berlin

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On September 6, the tenants' association Kotti & Co held an election meeting in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin featuring representatives of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. Only members of current and former governing parties were invited, all of which are responsible for the social misery in the city and rising rent prices. Critics of their policies were not welcome and were not permitted to speak.

Seated on the panel was Bundestag member Cansel Kiziltepe (SPD) as well as the housing policy spokespersons of the Greens (Katrin Schmidberger), the Left Party (Katrin Lompscher), and the CDU (Matthias Brauner).

After the SPD and CDU reiterated their tired campaign promises about more "affordable" housing and rent control and the Left Party and Greens made their calls for a "ban on speculation" and a "speculation tax," the discussion began.

When Endrik Bastian began to speak, introducing himself as a candidate of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany, PSG), he was cut off and the microphone taken from his hand. Sandy Kaltenborn, a self-employed designer who plays a leading in Kotti & Co, justified this by saying other parties were not allowed to promote their positions.

Tenants present were surprised by this anti-democratic behaviour. It was apparent that any comments critical of the role played by the Left Party, the Greens and the SPD were to be prevented at all costs. The organisers of the meeting were not concerned with the interests of tenants. Instead, they wanted to campaign for red-red-green, as the coalition of the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens is popularly known.

In its articles and speeches, the PSG has repeatedly

demonstrated the connection between housing shortages, exorbitant rents and growing poverty in Berlin and the reactionary politics of the governing and opposition parties. Endrik Bastian, running as a direct candidate of the PSG in the Mitte 5 electoral district, intended to make clear that the current orgy of enrichment carried out by property speculators in the Berlin housing market was a direct result of the politics of the SPD and the Left Party.

The facts are clear:

With the privatisation of the city-owned non-profit housing association GSW in 2004, the governing red-red coalition of the SPD and the Left Party gave the go-ahead for massive property speculation. Approximately 1,300 apartments in the high-rise buildings around the Kottbusser Tor neighbourhood in Berlin-Kreuzberg, where the meeting took place, were affected. Since the GSW was privatised, the rents there have risen sharply and have eaten up almost half of the already low incomes of residents.

As a consequence of the growing housing shortage, rent prices throughout Berlin are climbing sharply and the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens want to make sure the profits from rental incomes are not left to the speculators alone. They want in on it, too. That is why they call for "re-municipalisation," or putting the housing back under the control of the local authorities. For renters, this would change little, but it would create a great deal of lucrative positions for the parties of the Senate and their clientele.

With their campaign, Kotti & Co have taken on the task of mobilising the anger of renters to reinforce the call for re-municipalisation.

Their game became clear when a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter intervened in the discussion, confronting the Left Party's Katrin Lompscher. "First, I would like

to know why your party, which calls itself left, sold the GSW to speculators during the 10 years in which you governed under Klaus Wowereit. You paved the way for property speculation and massive rent increases.”

Lompscher, who from 2006 to 2011 served as senator of health in the red-red Senate controlled by the Left Party and the SPD, became irritated. Given the budget deficit of €400 million, she said, at the time there was no choice but to sell the GSW. But, of course, she now sees that as a “mistake.”

“Second question,” continued the WSWs reporter, “What is left and progressive about the call for re-municipalisation? The German property company Deutsche Wohnen AG, which ultimately bought up the GSW, profits twice. First, with the privatisation of the GSW and the outrageous rents, which brought them gains on the stock market. Then again through the high compensation involved in buying it back from them. If you are in government, you will force the population and the renters to pay for the resulting budget deficit, just as in the past.”

Lompscher did not respond. Instead, the Green Party representative answered that one obviously does not want the Deutsche Wohnen AG to profit twice from this. But at the moment there was no “legal basis for expropriation.” One could not force Deutsche Wohnen AG to do anything.

When one resident pointed out that housing needed to be “a basic right” and that no one should be allowed to speculate on it, Lompscher lectured her: “We’re up to our necks in capitalism, which regards things differently.” One first has to change the legal framework, “not just make a revolution.”

On this point, the representatives of the established parties and the tenant association Kotti & Co were united. The latter is more than happy to be called a “revolutionary opponent of real estate sharks” in the media. But that is a farce. The renters’ association was founded in 2011 at the end of the red-red coalition government, when the disastrous consequences of the GSW privatisation began to show themselves and the first rent increases were already announced. Since then, they have organised regular protest actions. In 2012, they occupied the forecourt of the former GSW high-rise south of Kottbusser Tor.

They raised the demand of re-municipalisation early on and strived for a public referendum on rent prices.

However, they withdrew this demand last November after making a deal with the parties of the Senate to recognise Kotti & Co as a direct negotiating partner in re-municipalisation matters.

A September 7 press release stated: “For months, Kotti & Co have been in discussion with the Greens and the Left Party about the future path toward re-municipalisation and gradual autonomy.” It goes on to say that Kotti & Co have even presented a financing plan for re-municipalisation “in broad outlines.”

It is no wonder that Sandy Kaltenborn, as spokesperson for Kotti & Co, reacted so sharply when PSG candidate Bastian took the microphone in order to expose these issues. This anti-democratic behaviour speaks volumes about the machinations in the rental policy of Kotti & Co and the Left Party.



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