

Red-Red-Green coalition in Berlin state prepares to continue austerity drive

Verena Nees

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The Social Democratic Party (SPD), Left Party and Greens have been holding talks in Berlin since October 6 on the formation of the new Senate, the government in the state of Berlin. The three parties intend to keep the population in the dark about the negotiations and have come to an agreement on the content of the talks behind the scenes.

All of the politicians sitting around the table were severely punished by voters at the September 18 state election for their right-wing and anti-social policies. The SPD, which formed the previous Senate with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had one of its worst electoral results.

The Greens were also among the election's losers, and the Left Party was able only to slightly improve on its worst ever election result, in 2011, by picking up some votes in a few districts in the west of the city. By contrast, it suffered losses in its stronghold in the east and barely won more seats than the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany).

The three-party coalition talks are taking an unusually long time. Mayor Michael Müller (SPD) has been on a trip to South America since last Friday to deliver speeches to the UN resettlement conference.

Only on October 24, after a 14-day break during the Berlin autumn holidays, are the coalition talks to begin again, with the focus on issues such as social, economic and security policy. According to the current timetable, the conclusion of the talks is scheduled for mid-November and congresses of the three parties will discuss the results at the beginning of December.

However, after the last round of talks, the Left Party pushed its congress back to December 10-11. Originally, the composition of the government was to have been announced on December 8.

Even though information has been lacking about the

initial three meetings, one thing is already clear: a so-called Red-Red-Green coalition will continue budgetary consolidation and impose an austerity programme on the backs of the working population.

At the first meeting in the coalition talks on October 6, the main issue was money. SPD Finance Senator Matthias Kollatz-Ahnen explained the financial position and made clear that the state had to prioritise eliminating its high debt level of €60 billion and consolidating the budget. In the stability report 2016 adopted by the Senate a few days later, it was stated bluntly, "The restructuring programme to which Berlin gave commitments to the stability council in 2011 will continue to be implemented."

To recall, this restructuring programme was worked out by the SPD-Left Party coalition prior to its electoral defeat in 2011. It included further job cuts in the public sector, the maintenance of wages roughly 10 percent lower than the national average, the continuation of savings in administration, further rent increases in state-owned properties, and additional sell-offs of state-owned properties. The stability council, led by federal Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), merely had to approve this plan in December 2011, meaning shortly after the election.

Hoping that not many people are aware of this, the Left Party wrote in its newsletter of October 7 that in the negotiations they had "pointed out that debt repayment and investment are not mutually exclusive contradictions..." At another point they justified this with reference to "room for manoeuvre" that had resulted from higher tax intakes.

Müller, the recently defeated mayor who will nonetheless continue in his post, saw things somewhat differently. According to local broadcaster RBB, Müller was relaxed after the first meeting, noting, "We

don't yet have a joint financial platform." But it had not been expected that this would take place quickly. Put differently, the SPD is confident that the Left Party will accept an austerity budget in the end.

Thilo Sarrazin, the finance senator in the SPD-Left Party coalition, recently praised his "certainly positive" collaboration with the Left Party. "In some ways, the budgetary consolidation was easier with them than with our own party colleagues," said the SPD politician, who is known not only for cuts in Berlin, but also for racist outbursts against immigrants.

The Left Party is focused on renewing such cooperation at any price. The party is therefore insisting that the coalition talks be kept secret. When, on Monday, Transport Senator Andreas Weisel (SPD) announced in the media that the SPD intended to cut the subsidy of the social ticket for public transport from €36 to €25, Left Party and Green officials responded angrily.

At the extraordinary state party meeting of the Left Party on September 30, which voted by a large majority to initiate the talks, former economics senator Harald Wolf made clear the Left Party's true attitude to investment in kindergartens, schools, public administration and transport.

When some members of Berlin's western districts wanted to impose conditions for commencing coalition talks, such as the building of 100,000 social housing units or a "multi-billion programme of investment," Wolf responded angrily, according to the *Berliner Zeitung*. He spoke out against "contributions that seek to cause the negotiations to fail before they have even begun."

In its talks with the SPD and Greens, the Left Party is keeping all options open. This includes its right-wing, bourgeois stance on financial and economic policies, as well as on the issue of the security apparatus. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Müller declared, "[A]ll of those responsible must pay attention to the less popular matters of security." The Left Party made no secret of its stance during the election campaign. Like the Greens and SPD, it is in favour of more police.

The establishment of an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition in Berlin is to be a trial run for a similar coalition at the federal level. However, recent foreign policy conflicts over the issue of Syria could hamper

the negotiations in Berlin.

The Greens are demanding stepped-up aggression towards Russia and some Green politicians such as Cem Özdemir would be ready to form a coalition with the CDU. By contrast, SPD Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier represents a similar position on the issue of Russia as the Left Party leadership of Sahra Wagenknecht and Gregor Gysi, which is to pursue a line more independent of the United States so as to advance the interests of German imperialism.

To ensure the establishment of a Red-Red-Green coalition in spite of these differences, 100 representatives of the SPD, Left Party and Greens from several states met behind closed doors on Tuesday in Berlin. The meeting was organised by Axel Schäfer, SPD parliamentary group chair in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and Jan Korte, a Left Party Bundestag deputy and a deputy to the parliamentary group chairpersons Wagenknecht and Dietmar Bartsch. A speech was given by the sociologist and Adorno pupil Oscar Negt, a strong proponent of a Red-Red-Green coalition.



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