German welfare recipients threatened with fines of up to €5,000

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28 October 2016

According to tightened state regulations regarding Germany's Hartz IV welfare benefits, the unemployed now have to deal with drastic penalties of up to €5,000 if the information on their applications is incomplete.

This regulation supplements Amendment 9 to the Social Security Codes II, which went into effect at the beginning of August. It was submitted by Andrea Nahles, Social Democratic Party (SPD) minister of social affairs and employment. It contains a far-reaching tightening of regulations for Hartz IV recipients.

The formation and content of the law demonstrates that, should a red-red-green coalition of the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens form the next government, social attacks will proceed and become even worse.

Under the title "Tougher penalties for tricksters and dawdlers," *Spiegel Online* reported October 25 on the new internal directives of the Federal Labour Office. These determine how the amended law will be enforced. Among other things, sanctions against Hartz IV recipients whose application forms contain errors can include fines of up to €5,000.

The Hartz IV provisions, which amount to a single payment of €404 per month plus rent and heating costs, is not sufficient for a humane existence. Recipients have already been humiliated by sanctions, harassed, and robbed of their social rights. They have been punished by benefit reductions of 30, 40 and—among young people—up to 100 percent. The new regulations represent a further escalation in the attacks against them.

Up to now, one would only be threatened with penalties if false information had been entered on applications. Now it is enough for information to be missing. Penalties can be imposed even when no damage has been done.

Imprisonment is also a possibility. The *Bild* newspaper quoted from the directives of the authorities, according to which Hartz IV recipients shall face prison time if they have "clearly expressed their unwillingness to pay," a regulation which opens the door for arbitrary detentions and the deprivation of rights.

In addition to this, Job Centers must inform the relevant immigration authorities if a foreign Hartz IV recipient is penalized with fines of more than €1,000, a fact that could encourage their deportation. In the event of "petty offences," the Job Centers will now impose fines of up to €55, instead of the previous €50 maximum.

The effect of these regulations will be devastating. No Hartz IV recipient can pay a fine of €5,000 and no bank will provide them with credit for such fines. The government is forcing complete subjugation to the Hartz IV regime, which will lead to deeper indebtedness, homelessness, illness, hunger, addiction and criminality.

Such laws are directed against the entire working class. They are meant to create an atmosphere of anxiety and fear among workers and youth. Any worker who is laid off must fear that they will wind up on the streets or in prison.

Around 4.3 million people of working age are Hartz IV recipients. The ongoing capitalist crisis is driving the numbers of the long-term unemployed especially high, with 1 in 3 (1.4 million) living on welfare for more than eight years.

When life at the minimum subsistence level becomes a permanent state, fear, worry and need become prevalent, which already makes it more difficult to fill out the complicated Hartz IV applications correctly.

According to information from the Federal Labour Office (BA), from April 2015 to March 2016, the Job Centers have imposed almost 1 million benefit reductions (950,000 against 414,000 beneficiaries). Nearly 7,000 people had their benefits cut completely in March 2016. Young people up to the age of 25, as well as minors, are especially affected by these brutal measures. In the last year, 1,800 persons sanctioned were only 15 years old and almost 15,000 between the ages of 16 and 17 years old.

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From 2007 to 2015, the Federal Labour Office saved €1.7 billion alone through sanctions.

The law, which was created under the auspices of Minister Nahles, exploits the desperate situation of those affected to place them under even greater financial and social pressure and finally to condemn them to misery.

Nahles' actions are in keeping with the tradition of the red-green government of Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer. During their period of rule (1998-2005), they used their Agenda 2010 reforms to begin a comprehensive assault on the social rights of the working class. The Hartz laws were a component of their sanctions regime.

For the federal elections in 2017, a new government of the SPD and the Greens is being prepared, but this time the Left Party will also be taken on board. In the state of Berlin and nationally, a red-red-green coalition government is currently being prepared.

Until now, the SPD and the Greens have repeatedly rejected a nationwide collaboration with the Left Party. Under conditions of deep economic and political crisis, however, sections of the ruling class see in an alliance between the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party the only possibility for carrying out their program of social cuts and militarism domestically and abroad against the opposition of the working class.

Such an alliance would not be a left-wing alternative to a Christian Democratic Union/Social Democratic Party government. On the contrary, it would build on their right-wing policies and strengthen them further.

As far as the SPD is concerned, the initiative for tougher sanctions against Hartz IV beneficiaries comes directly from them. Gabriele Lösekrug-Möller (SPD), the state secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, justified the sanctions by saying that without them there would be no way to make sure that welfare recipients "were also committed to cooperation" and ready to supply "their own effort." Obviously, the SPD representatives voted both in parliament and the federal council for stricter laws.

The Greens have surpassed the SPD in hypocrisy and cynicism. As the junior partner of the SPD, they passed the Hartz IV legislation together with the sanctions regime. However, since the party congress in 2012 in Hannover, they have called for a moratorium on sanctions. Party head Cem Özdemir warned at that time that the Greens should be identified with "participation and justice" on this issue, and denounced the "humiliation" of Hartz IV recipients.

Member of Parliament Brigette Pothmer (Green Party) conceded that "this Hartz IV system [is] perceived as a very repressive system by the entire society, but especially by the unemployed."

In October 2015, the Greens in parliament requested the suspension of sanctions pending an expert evaluation of the sanctions process. This request was nothing but a publicity stunt to make it look like they opposed the awful situation in the Job Centres. In parliament, Nahles rejected the change in the law.

In the Federal Council vote, however, the Greens voted for a law that went far beyond the legislation Özdemir had called a "humiliation" for the sake of publicity back in 2012.

However, the Left Party is playing an even more despicable role. It openly advocates a red-red-green coalition and recommends itself as a coalition partner by throwing all its platitudes about discriminatory welfare practice overboard and supporting Hartz IV. Recently, the Left Party participated in a joint meeting with the SPD and the Greens in parliament. The philosopher Oskar Negt opened the meeting by saying that the "collapse of democratic institutions" could only be prevented by means of a "collaborative left working together."

The Left Party representatives of two states that have coalition governments with the SPD abstained from the parliamentary vote over Nahles' law "out of consideration for the coalition partners," as Katja Kipping put it.

The new attacks on Hartz IV recipients prescribed by Amendment 9 to the Social Security Codes II provide a foretaste of the kind of measures that would be carried out by a red-red-green federal government.

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