Angry protests against the Berlin senate's refugee policies

Verena Nees
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The governing coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Left Party and Greens in the Berlin Senate has only been in office three months but anger with its right-wing policies is already growing. Last Monday, the construction of a camp using shipping containers to house refugees at the former Tempelhof airport led to fierce protests at a town hall meeting.

Elke Breitenbach, Left Party Senator (state minister) for Social Affairs, responsible for refugee accommodation, held a public meeting in Berlin Neukölln to answer questions and justify the construction of the camp on the edge of the former airport.

Accommodation in metal containers, euphemistically called "Temp Homes", was "better than in gymnasiums and airport hangars," Breitenbach said in her introductory remarks. Here, at least, there was some "privacy".

Local residents, refugees and their supporters who flocked into the hall saw this quite differently. The slogan "New Senate—Same old Politics!?" was printed on numerous placards that met the Senator for Social Affairs, and in the hall there was a banner emblazoned, "Integration instead of ghettos."

Since the beginning of February, the contractor has been busy unloading shipping containers on a large fenced area next to the tarmac of the former Tempelhof airport. A total of 976 containers for four to six people have been placed there. Starting this summer, up to 1,140 refugees are to be moved there, including around 550 people who currently still live in airport hangars. According to Breitenbach, the containers were "just temporary" accommodation for a period of up to three years.

Now the first rows of containers have been installed and resemble nothing less than military-style barracks. There are no trees to provide shade for the metal shacks, which in summer will face merciless heat from the sun, and icy winds in winter.

"How can we heat them in winter", a woman who had fled from Afghanistan asked, one of those who has had to live in the airport hangar for a year and who came to the meeting with other women refugees. "How can a family fit into such a small space? Are we allowed to receive visitors? And why is there a fence? People will stare at our kids like caged animals in the zoo." The women were not convinced that the temporary sheds represent any improvement over the hangars.

With the construction of the refugee ghetto at Tempelhof, the so-called "Red-Red-Green" coalition in the Berlin state assembly, which the Left Party had touted as a turn towards a more humane refugee policy, is continuing the policies of the outgoing grand coalition of the SPD and Christian Democrats. The Left Party is now itself directly responsible for the treatment of refugees.

Breitenbach justified her actions saying, "A ghetto yes, there are fences—for forensic reasons". She admitted that, "Nicer accommodation looks different," but the hangars and the ICC exhibition hall were worse ghettos.

There was no other choice, Breitenbach insisted, as she was repeatedly interrupted by catcalls and angry heckling. One must temporarily fall back on "Temp Homes", even if one did not want to do this, and it was very expensive, she said. Nevertheless, she noted that well over ten thousand refugees were currently living in "precarious conditions", in gymnasiums and other makeshift shelters.

Claiming that the Left Party preferred to accommodate them in regular apartments Breitenbach insisted that these were not so easy to find. She wisely chose not to mention the policies of the previous SPD-Left Party Senate, which sold off thousands of public housing units to speculators and thus intensified the housing shortage in Berlin.

In the previous SPD-Left Party coalition in the Berlin senate, Breitenbach learned how to recast social oppression as something progressive. From 2002 to 2003, she was the personal assistant to the then Social Affiars Senator Heidi Knake-Werner, a member of the Party of Democratic Socialism, the predecessor of the Left Party, who was responsible for implementing the Schröder government's Hartz IV welfare cuts against the unemployed.

The attempts of the Left Party Senator for Social Affairs

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and the other representatives on the panel, including the district mayor Angelika Schöttler (SPD) and Monika Herrmann (Green Party), to place the shipping container ghetto in a favourable light were met with resentment and jeers. The applause of a few Left Party cheerleaders scattered around the hall sounded pathetic.

State Secretary Dr. Sudhof (SPD), who was also on the podium, highlighted the "precarious" housing situation of refugees in Berlin. Sudhof presented a graph which showed there were still 15,900 people housed in emergency shelters in Berlin in February 2017, while in the rest of Germany the figure was just 4,100.

The numbers speak for themselves. Sudhof, who had already served as Finance Senator under Dieter Glietsch, could not have emphasized more graphically the impact of the catastrophic refugee policy in Berlin, for which the SPD has been responsible for years at the head of the Berlin Senate. Glietsch was formerly chief of police of the Red-Red coalition and was hired by the grand coalition that followed under the same mayor Michael Müller (SPD) as a refugee manager.

The arguments used by Glietsch to justify the quartering of refugees in the Tempelhof hangars at the town meeting in early 2016 still resound: In an emergency, one must "push down" one's own minimum standards, but this was only temporary. The words of the Red-Red-Green Senate representatives regarding the Temp Homes sound just the same.

The greatest expressions of anger at last Monday's meeting were directed against the Left Party, which had announced a change in social policy and the better integration of refugees following the election.

Some participants engaged in a heated argument with those on the podium regarding the location of the containers away from the airport hangars. They expressed the suspicion that the Senate had other plans for the tarmac and was starting the redevelopment of Tempelhof Field by the back door.

"I voted for you, because last September, the Left Party, Greens and Pirate Party had promised they would not change the Tempelhof law," one woman shouted angrily. "And now the Left Party is sitting up there and implementing the policies of the SPD! For me, this is a clear indication that there is something else at stake here than a serious solution to the refugee crisis."

Given the volatile mood in the hall, the spokesman of the Left Party from Neukölln, Moritz Wittler, decided to speak. Wittler is a supporter of the pseudo-left Marx21 group, the German satellite of the British Socialist Workers Party, which has a base in the Left Party's Neukölln district association.

As is typical of the pseudo left, to some cheers, he directed radical-sounding criticism at the "comrade" Social Senator. "It is impossible, comrade, the way you are dealing with the citizens here, how you are sticking up for the false policies of the SPD?" and, "I demand and expect from our government that it stands up to the mighty of the city."

Wittler demonstrates the key role Marx21 plays in the current situation, like other pseudo-left groups. They serve as a lightning rod and criticize the policies of the Left Party only to subordinate the growing opposition to the Red-Red-Green coalition. This is the duplicitous game they played after the last election.

The Neukölln delegates submitted a resolution to the Left Party special conference, which rejected the coalition negotiations with the SPD and Greens—only to explain in the next breath that if, as they expected, they did not succeed, they would "critically" support the new state executive.

The atmosphere in the hall became even more heated when, finally, the new leader of the Left Party in Berlin, Katina Schubert, stood up and came to the rescue of Social Senator Breitenbach. She cynically called the audience stupid. They had probably never heard before that one must make compromises in a coalition.

When participants angrily shouted that "compromise" meant locking refugees in an enclosed ghetto, Schubert went on to declare, "Neukölln is a stronghold of the extreme right. We must protect the refugees from attacks."

Breitenbach, visibly nervous, joined in the chorus asserting that it was necessary to fence off and guard the containers, to know who was staying on the premises. "And for those here who hurl abuse at me, I can dish it back", she attacked her critics.

The Left Party is showing its true colours on the refugee question. It does not support such a ghetto because there were no better options; on the contrary, integration through housing refugees in apartments in the midst of Berlin's population is undesired. In line with the federal government's new asylum and deportation policy, the Red-Red-Green coalition in Berlin aims to deport masses of refugees through so-called "voluntary return measures."

The meeting confirmed that workers and youth will only be able to organize the defence of refugees independently of the Left Party and their pseudo-left supporters.

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