Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party to continue right-wing agenda in German state of Berlin

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The Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Left Party presented their coalition agreement on Monday for the incoming state government in Berlin, known as the Senate. It lays the foundation for the continuation of their right-wing politics. The so-called red-red-green coalition has governed Berlin since 2016.

Party congresses of the SPD and Greens will vote on whether to accept the agreement on December 5 and December 12, respectively. The Left Party will poll its membership December 3-17. SPD state leader Franziska Giffey could then be elected mayor of Germany's capital city by the House of Representatives on December 21.

Leaving aside the noncommittal rhetoric and empty phrases of the 152-page document, the coalition agreement clearly shows that the three parties are preparing a direct confrontation with the working class.

Giffey, who is even considered a right-wing hardliner within the SPD, has long favoured an alliance with the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Free Democrats (FDP) or—as in the federal government—with the Greens and the FDP. But after violent strikes and protests broke out during the election in Berlin, where the social divide is even sharper than in other cities, and a referendum in favour of the expropriation of large property firms won majority support, the SPD decided that social opposition can be suppressed most effectively in cooperation with the Greens and the Left Party.

The pandemic policy shows the right-wing character of the red-green-red coalition particularly clearly. Like the federal and other state governments, the Berlin Senate has also pursued a conscious policy of mass infection. This has led to 277,000 registered infections and 3,835 deaths since the pandemic began—and the numbers are rising rapidly.

The mass infection of staff and students in schools is being pursued with particular ruthlessness. According to data from the Berlin health administration, 4,565 infections were registered among students across all levels of schools in the last week alone. In the previous week, the figure was 4,272. In addition, 469 teachers have been infected since the pandemic began. In the last two weeks, seven and then nine schools had to switch to hybrid learning due to high numbers of infections. Nevertheless, Education Senator Sandra Scheeres (SPD) continues to insist that in-person attendance remains compulsory in schools.

Like the federal government, the Berlin Senate is not doing anything to protect the population from the rapidly increasing numbers of infections and the dangerous Omicron variant. Already during the election campaign, Giffey declared that lockdowns were "outdated" and that adopting this policy was categorically excluded even with high numbers of infections. The red-green-red coalition would rather put up with thousands of deaths and the mass infection of children than restrict the profits of big business even minimally.

The same right-wing outlook is also evident in the handling of the referendum on the expropriation of large property firms, for which more than 56 percent voted in September.

During the election campaign, the Left Party, which is closely connected to the initiators of the referendum, campaigned for a "yes" vote. But now, the coalition partners are using tried and tested tactics to bury the result and push any decision on it far into the future. The coalition agreement states that the result will be "respected." But instead of taking practical steps, a commission is to be set up within 100 days to check whether the move is in conformity with the constitution and consider its impact on finance policy. In 2023, the Senate will then "if necessary" be presented with key points on which it can freely decide.

In plain language: There will be no expropriation of any kind, regardless of what the voters have decided. The SPD and Greens had already spoken out in the election campaign in favour of introducing further subsidies for property firms so that they could build more apartments. This guarantees that rents in Berlin will continue to rise.

The SPD, Greens and Left Party also agreed to achieve a balanced budget by the end of the legislative period. The "leeway of the debt brake" should be used, as stated in the coalition agreement (the debt brake imposes strict limits on state borrowing, which the coalition continues to embrace). Among other things, this is to be achieved through only a

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“moderate increase in personnel and material expenses”—in plain language: real wage reductions and further austerity measures. The rigid austerity course of recent years will therefore be continued.

This is also the background to the outrageous sellout of the strike at the state-owned Charité and Vivantes hospitals, where employees went on strike for up to 50 days for better pay and more staff. The governing parties, in direct cooperation with the Verdi trade union, ensured that the strikers were fobbed off with ridiculously low pay increases and empty promises of improved staffing levels.

As far as asylum and deportation policies are concerned, the coalition parties intend to stick to largely the same approach. The statement in the coalition agreement that people should no longer be deported directly from schools, hospitals or in the middle of the night only makes it clear what was previously common practice under the red-red-green coalition.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, people continue to be deported. The authorities employed brutal and inhuman methods. For the most part, the deportations were carried out by the police at night, which had even more traumatic consequences for those affected.

In the first half of 2021 alone, Berlin deported 516 people. During the same period last year, when the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was rampant, it was “only” 301, and 968 for the entire year 2020. The Berlin state government even deported three people to Afghanistan from January to March 2021, despite the occupation and the civil war. Interior Senator Andreas Geisel only stopped deportations to Afghanistan in April.

The Left Party’s Berlin election manifesto cynically stated, “We generally reject deportations. They are part of an inhumane asylum policy. This particularly applies to refugees in need of protection.”

A key point of the coalition agreement is the strengthening of the state apparatus. While an austerity dictate prevails in all other areas, the coalition agreement provides for “more police personnel.” The police should be further strengthened regardless of the cost. The use of body cameras is to be continued and financially secured. When presenting the agreement, Giffey said, “It is very clear that we want a strong state.”

This also explicitly includes strengthening the intelligence agency. According to the coalition agreement, the agency “must be further developed in a targeted manner in order to fulfil its tasks.” In addition, democratic rights are systematically being eroded. The use of video surveillance will be expanded under the guise of preventive crime-fighting.

The defence of the intelligence service by the red-red-green coalition must be taken as a warning. In order to suppress the growing opposition in the working class, the coalition is making a pact with the most right-wing elements in the state apparatus and is consciously strengthening right-wing extremist forces. Martin Trefzer, a representative of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), is one of the members of the newly elected Presidium of the Berlin House of Representatives. Trefzer only managed to secure election because the SPD, Left Party and Greens refused to vote against him.

There was nothing accidental about this decision. Trefzer is an open supporter of the right-wing extremist Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski, and the red-red-green Senate has already made common cause with him in the past to target left-wing critics. When Trefzer asked the House of Representatives in 2018 for the names of all those students who are politically active in the student council at Humboldt University, Humboldt University president Sabine Kunst (SPD) filed a lawsuit against the student representatives at her own university to force the names to be made public. It later emerged that Kunst acted on the direct orders of the Senate. Both Kunst and Baberowski, who not only verbally attacks critical students, but also physically assaults them, have been vehemently defended by the red-red-green coalition.

According to reports, there will be significant changes in the new cabinet. At least eight of the 11 previous senators are to be replaced. Significantly, Interior Senator Geisel appears set to remain in office at the request of all coalition partners. He is considered an outspoken law-and-order man who is notorious above all for his rigorous deportation policy and his brutal actions against squatters on Riga Street.

The Left Party is expected to take over the portfolios of culture, justice and social affairs. To head the latter department, former leader of the federal Left Party, Katja Kipping, is under discussion. Kipping headed the party for nine years until the beginning of this year. She is a strong advocate of a red-red-green alliance and will aggressively continue the austerity policies imposed over recent years.

Workers and youth must prepare for intensified class battles. Only an independent workers’ movement can stop the right-wing policies of the red-red-green Senate. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) participated in the House of Representatives elections to arm the growing popular opposition with a socialist perspective. The building of the SGP is now posed as an urgent task.

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