

Frankfurt's corrupt Social Democratic Party mayor ousted in referendum

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Last Friday was the final day of work for Frankfurt, Germany's Mayor Peter Feldmann (Social Democratic Party, SPD). In a November 6 referendum, 95.1 percent of participating voters cast their ballots in favor of his removal from office. The necessary quorum of 30 percent of all eligible voters (152,455 votes) was more than met.

More than 200,000 Frankfurt voters submitted ballots to remove Feldmann from the mayorship. The impetus for this dismissal was Feldmann's personal involvement in the corruption scandal involving *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* (Association of Welfare Workers, a.k.a. Awo), which brazenly skimmed off funds at taxpayers' expense. The current proceedings against Feldmann are only the tip of an iceberg of corruption involving millions of euros.

In March, the public prosecutor's office filed charges against Feldmann for taking advantage of his office. The charges are based on the fact that his then-girlfriend and later wife was hired as head of an Awo day care center "without objective reason," received an unusually high salary and was granted a company car. During the 2018 election campaign, the Awo also solicited donations for Feldmann, who, as head of the city, "benevolently considered" the interests of the association in return.

In the midst of the ongoing court case, Feldmann's removal in Sunday's vote was driven by a "broad alliance" of Greens, Christian Democrats (CDU), Liberals (FDP), the Volt party as well as the SPD. The Left Party, the influential IG Metall union and the Green Party "left" Jutta Ditfurth (ÖkoLinX–Ecological Left) opposed the referendum.

The highest-ranking representative of IG Metall Frankfurt, Michael Erhardt (Left Party), said: "We trade unions have nothing to gain from his no longer being mayor. No one represents so strongly our topics ... Affordable housing, inexpensive public transport, free child care. Who's going to do it?"

This hypocritical and self-serving claim is based on two factors: Feldmann's origins in modest circumstances and his rise through the Social Democratic networks, which include IG Metall.

Peter Feldmann, born in 1958, spent his youth in the high-rise development of Bonames in the north of Frankfurt and graduated from the Ernst Reuter school. He then trained as a gardener in Israel before beginning his studies in political science in Marburg. At the age of nine, he joined the youth organization SJD-The Falcons, at 18 he became a member of the SPD youth organization Young Socialists (Juso), by 30 becoming Juso chairman with a seat on the Frankfurt City Council.

He owed his rise to mayor entirely to the protection of the SPD and Awo, which regularly provided him with new appointments: sometimes as head of a youth center or senior citizens' home, sometimes as an advisor or in a specially created "staff position" to prepare his election campaign. Ten years ago, in March 2012, he won his election campaign with big promises: "Against child poverty and housing shortages, for a liberal and cosmopolitan city," etc. He won the mayoral election in a runoff with over 70 percent of the vote.

By that time, however, the era of reformism was long past. Seven years earlier the German federal government had been an SPD-Green coalition under then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer. With the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV social welfare programs, that government set in motion the development of a new low-wage sector, initiated wide-scale privatization and presided over the impoverishment of the working class. Frankfurt, the metropolis on the Main River, was no exception.

- **Housing shortages:** The housing crisis has become extremely acute in the last ten years. Families with children in particular can no longer find affordable homes in Germany's financial capital. More than 30,000 families are actively looking for an affordable place to live. The municipal housing company ABG Holding reports 9,000 people looking for social housing and 23,000 for housing on the open market. Its supervisory board chairman is Peter Feldmann. He also sits on the supervisory board of the real estate holding company Nassauische Heimstätte.

- **Low-wage sector:** Feldmann is also chairman of the supervisory board of the municipal utility company and the RMV public transport company, the trade fair, the opera and the Schirn art gallery, and a member of the supervisory board of the airport service provider Fraport AG. In all cases—in the public sector, in local transport, at the airport, etc.—decently paid jobs are being systematically cut and replaced by low-wage positions. During Feldmann's city administration, the bus drivers of the privatized Frankfurt companies went on strike several times to fight for living wages, without success.

At the airport, laid-off ground workers even went on hunger strike against the service company WISAG. Its patron, Claus Wisser, a multimillionaire and SPD member, has been Feldmann's close friend and confidant since their Juso days. Feldmann invited Wisser to his wedding and to his 60th birthday and, conversely, congratulated Wisser on his eightieth birthday in June 2022.

- **Child poverty:** The unemployed, single parents and Hartz IV

recipients are being systematically forced out of the city. Over the course of three years of the coronavirus pandemic, the miserable situation has worsened. Food banks for the needy have seen an increase in patronage of over 50 percent and can barely cope with the onslaught. The pandemic period in particular exposed the city's lack of solidarity and its inhumane policies under Feldmann. By official numbers, no fewer than 1,485 people have died in Frankfurt so far in connection with the coronavirus.

Peter Feldmann has also proven himself to be a right-wing, warmongering politician. Since the first day of the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, he has steadfastly stood by the side of the government and especially his party friend, Chancellor Olaf Scholz. He unreservedly supports its aggressive militarism, rearmament and arms deliveries to Kiev.

In September, Feldmann singlehandedly initiated a city partnership with Kiev. Against a resolution of the city council, during a meeting in Prague Feldmann presented his counterpart, Kiev Mayor Vitali Klitschko, with a draft of a city partnership with Frankfurt. Feldmann commented, "Ukraine can rely on us."

The Awo scandal played a central role in Feldmann's social and political degeneration.

The *Arbeiterwohlfahrt*—founded 100 years ago as a Social Democratic workers' self-help organization—has long since been transformed into a bureaucratic monster for capitalist enrichment. Its homes for the elderly, day care centers, youth centers, counseling centers and refugee shelters, etc., are today financed almost entirely from government grants, i.e., from tax revenues. In addition to tens of thousands of volunteers, the association employs around 230,000 full-time, mostly poorly paid staff.

The Awo owes its lucrative contracts to the fact that the state is increasingly withdrawing from its social obligations and passing them on to "non-profit" associations, thereby undermining the non-profit status itself. In the last thirty years or so, the Awo, alongside the SPD and the unions, has increasingly degenerated into a self-service store for careerists and profiteers.

In the south of the state of Hesse, the Awo directors Jürgen and Hannelore Richter hit the jackpot when they succeeded in elevating their protégé Feldmann to the position of mayor. This gave them the necessary backing from the city for ever larger, barely accountable contracts. Since then the Richters and other Awo officials have spent almost four years in court on trial for massively inflated executive salaries, false accounting, expensive company cars, dubious consulting contracts, etc.

Especially as thousands of refugees came to Germany in 2015 and Frankfurt needed new accommodations at short notice, the word was: "Awo does, the city pays." Just for security alone, more than 7 million euros are said to have flowed from the city coffers via the newly founded Awo project.

Further millions flowed into (bad) catering, (imaginary) sports courses and the conclusions of real estate and consulting contracts. Eventually, Awo's demands became so brazen that the city pulled the ripcord in 2018 and terminated the contracts. A short time later, the scandal burst with the first corruption trial.

The text messages from the Awo managing directors to their "friend," the mayor, which now form part of the indictment against Feldmann, date from this time. For example, Hannelore

Richter, managing director of the Wiesbaden Awo district association, wrote to him, "You could always rely on our support and loyalty, now we are relying on you." Other text messages read: "Dear Peter, we/I need your help," or simply: "Quid pro quo" (loosely translated: "One hand washes the other").

According to the prosecution, Feldmann's future wife Zübeide Temiziel also owes her lucrative job as head of a German-Turkish day care center solely to her husband's office and his relations with Awo. The indictment states that Feldmann introduced his then-partner to the Richters in the spring of 2014. "There we have our leader!" Hannelore Richter exclaimed and at a restaurant later promised Temiziel the well-endowed, €4500 per month position for which Temiziel, then still a student, was not at all qualified.

To this day Feldmann rejects all accusations with the assertion, "I am not corrupt." On Sunday, the freshly ousted mayor claimed that it was not about the trappings of office for him, rather "more than anything about the social issues." At that point, however, there was practically no one left to defend him: just 4.9 percent of the votes cast were against his ouster.

The few who still supported Feldmann, like Ditfurth of the Ecological Left and IG Metall official Erhardt, argue that the corrupt SPD may be followed by an even more right-wing, even more corrupt CDU or FDP mayor or even worse. They conceal the fact that it is precisely their repulsive bureaucratic swamp that prepares the way for the most right-wing forces—precisely because they themselves are part of the same swamp.

When it came to social, wage and job cuts, the federal and state governments, whether led by the CDU, the SPD or the Greens and the Left Party, could always rely on the help and support of the unions. The fact that IG Metall, the Left Party and ÖkoLinX are now backing the corrupt Feldmann shows that they are bitter enemies of the only force that can bring about real change: the socialist working class.



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