Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance joins government in 2 German states to impose austerity measures

Peter Schwarz
15 December 2024

Less than a year after the founding of the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), the first ministers of the new party have taken the oath of office in two German states. Last week, in Brandenburg a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and BSW and in Thuringia a three-party alliance of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), BSW and SPD, supported by the Left Party, took over the governments.

The BSW experienced a rapid rise to prominence after its foundation in January to emerge as the third strongest party in elections in September in the East German states of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. Since then it has suffered a decline in fortunes. It is now questionable whether the BSW will make it into the Bundestag next February. Having reached 9 percent in nationwide polls in the summer, it now stands at 5 percent.

Wagenknecht's party won votes primarily because it spoke out against providing support for the war in Ukraine, denounced social injustices and attacked the established parties. At the same time, it favored strengthening the police and advocated a refugee policy that is no different to that of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

But now the Wagenknecht party is governing together with the SPD and CDU, which have dominated federal politics for decades and are responsible for escalating the war in Ukraine. The BSW has taken over responsibility for the finance ministries in both Brandenburg and Thuringia and is therefore in charge of imposing restrictive budgets through massive austerity programs.

As the WSWS has already reported, the BSW has committed itself in the Thuringian coalition agreement to comply with the prevailing debt brake (no new debts) and to take immediate measures to reduce "a structural budget deficit of over 1.3 billion euros." With a total budget of 13.5 billion euros, this means average savings of 10 percent. Spending on the police and internal security is being increased, which means the cuts in the social sector will be correspondingly higher. The situation is similar in Brandenburg.

The coalition agreements and the new governments in Brandenburg and Thuringia send a clear message: "Business as usual!" The Wagenknecht party's assurances that it will change things are proving to be illusory. This will fuel the fortunes of the far-right AfD—the only opposition party in Thuringia and the biggest opposition party in Brandenburg ahead of the CDU. The AfD will be able to continue to exploit the anger towards the established parties for its reactionary purposes.

In Brandenburg, the transition from the former to the new administration went largely smoothly. The respective politicians know each other and have been working together for decades. State Premier Dietmar Woidke (SPD), who has governed the state since 2013, remains in office.

Robert Crumbach, his deputy, was a member of the SPD for 41 years—even longer than Woidke—before switching to the BSW this year. He is a member of the Verdi trade union and has worked as a consultant in the Brandenburg Ministry of Labor, as a member of the SPD state parliamentary group and as a labor court judge in Potsdam and Brandenburg an der Havel. He is now taking over responsibility for finance and European affairs in the new government.

Britta Müller, who heads the Ministry of Health and

© World Socialist Web Site

Social Affairs for the BSW, was also a member of the SPD until she resigned this year. She is now an independent. The third BSW minister, Detlef Tabbert, is responsible for infrastructure and regional planning. He was originally a member of the Left Party and previously mayor of the town of Templin in the Uckermark.

All other ministries—heads of the State Chancellery, Interior, Economy, Agriculture, Education, Science and Justice—are under the control of the SPD and are headed by former ministers and close confidants of Woidke.

The only condition that Wagenknecht set for the continuation of previous policies in a new guise were a few hollow phrases about the war in Ukraine in the coalition agreement. It states: “We take seriously the concerns of our citizens that the war is spreading and that there is a risk that Germany will be drawn into an ever faster spiralling war. It is not possible to end the war by supplying more weapons.”

This is neither a clear rejection of the German government’s war policy nor does it have any practical consequences, because these issues are not decided in Potsdam but by the federal government in Berlin.

Where the state government can make a difference, however, the coalition agreement unreservedly comes down in favor of militarism. It expressly supports the development of Bundeswehr bases in Brandenburg and justifies this by stating that “the defense capability of our country is of great importance and the Bundeswehr’s ability to defend itself must be strengthened.”

In addition to the SPD and BSW, only the AfD and the CDU are still represented in the new state parliament, after both the Left Party and the Greens failed to reach the 5 percent threshold. With 46 out of 88 seats, the SPD and BSW have a narrow majority. Nevertheless, Woidke failed in the first round of voting for state premier, receiving only 43 votes instead of the 45 required.

BSW Deputy Sven Hornauf had announced that he would not vote for Woidke in protest against the deployment of the Arrow 3 missile defense system in Brandenburg. The identities of the two other members of the governing coalition who voted against Woidke remain unknown. In the second round of voting, Woidke then received 50 votes, i.e., with at least four votes from AfD and/or CDU deputies.

Forming a government in Thuringia was much more complicated. The AfD, led by the fascist Björn Höcke, is by far the strongest party in the state. The Left Party, which filled the post of state premier with Bodo Ramelow for the past 10 years, is now only in fourth place.

CDU leader Mario Voigt finally agreed on a coalition with the BSW and the SPD but with only half of all parliamentary seats lacks a majority. The Left Party was prepared to participate in the state government, but Voigt rejected this because the CDU at the federal level has banned any form of cooperation with the Left Party.

In the end, the Left Party nevertheless helped Voigt to win a majority. He was elected premier in the first round of voting with 51 out of 88 votes. Voigt had previously integrated the Left Party into the administration by agreeing to regular consultations over “specific parliamentary duties” before any bill is introduced into parliament. This means that all parties represented in parliament, with the exception of the AfD, are involved in governmental policy.

The BSW and the Left Party are assuming the role of key props for the representative of a party whose federal chairman and possible next chancellor, Friedrich Merz, is vehemently in favor of escalating the war in Ukraine, up to and including the delivery of German Taurus missiles to Ukraine.

Voigt’s deputy and finance minister in his government is Katja Wolf, the state chairwoman of the BSW. She comes originally from the Left Party and was previously mayor of Eisenach. The new Environment minister, Tilo Kummer, also joined the BSW after quitting the Left Party.

The SPD, the smallest coalition partner, is in charge of two key ministries, the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Interior Minister Georg Maier already held this office under the Left Party administration led by Bodo Ramelow.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site