

The Left Party's campaign in the Berlin state election

By Christoph Dreier
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Over the last few weeks, many Berliners must have been rubbing their eyes in disbelief upon seeing the election posters of the German Left Party. Whereas their coalition partner in Berlin, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), have refrained from making any specific political statements on their campaign posters (no doubt because of the catastrophic performance of the SPD-Left Party coalition), the Left Party has been saturating the capital city with cynical lies. Their slogans demand exactly the opposite of what they have been implementing over their last 10 years in power in the Berlin Senate.

At the same time, the Left Party's official election program brazenly defends the sweeping social cuts they have already implemented, and seeks to justify the "hard line program" of the Berlin coalition parliament by declaring there is no alternative. They argue that federal government policies and the state of affairs left behind by their predecessors in Berlin have left the city-state no room for manoeuvre. The Berlin senator for industry and commerce, Harald Wolf (Left Party), announced at an election campaign meeting that the only possibility in the future was to "distribute the little that is available as fairly as possible".

This is the number one lie in the Left Party's election campaign. Contrary to their constant rhetoric about not wanting to bow down to economic pressure, they have played a major role in making the very decisions that have led to a transfer of wealth to the top 10 percent of society, emptying the public purse in the process.

One of the first official acts of the "SPD-Left Party" coalition in 2002 was their decision to institute the so-called "risk-shield-law" safety net for Berlin banks, which required the city of Berlin to underwrite the debts of the bankrupt Berlin Banking Society (BBG) to the tune of €21.6 billion. The Left Party (at the time under the name of its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism, PDS) thereby guaranteed the investments of all those better-off citizens who had purchased special investment bonds with guaranteed returns under the previous administration. In addition the coalition of the SPD and PDS transferred €1.75 billion directly to the BBG.

In accordance with this tradition of donating billions to the banks, the Berlin Senate also voted in the Bundesrat for the federal government rescue package for the banks in 2008—thereby agreeing to the immense enrichment of bankers and speculators in times of economic and financial crisis.

Given this evidence of their partisanship, the phony outrage of the Left Party expressed in its election campaign literature over the policies of the national government is pure eyewash. The Left Party is simultaneously issuing assurances that it will undertake policies to reduce the public debts that they themselves ran up in their billion-euro bailout of the super-rich.

The balance sheet of the SPD-Left Party Berlin Senate reveals the complete bankruptcy of Left Party propaganda, which seeks to foment the illusion that social reforms can be gained under capitalism. The realities in Berlin starkly demonstrate the true character of this party: their socialistic phraseology serves only to camouflage the fact that the "robust

policies" they are implementing, with the help of the SPD and trade union bureaucracies, are defined by the needs of the ruling elites, and act against the interests of the majority of the people.

The shamelessness with which the Left Party is attempting to mask its social spending cuts with left sounding posturing is reminiscent of the cynical Stalinist bureaucrats of the East German ruling party (SED), from which the PDS and then the Left Party emerged. As was the case in the former GDR, the Left Party bureaucrats seek to justify their oppression of the working class with left-sounding arguments. In former East Germany, the party's current membership is still made up mainly of old SED members, who have remained true to the party following the 1990 reunification of Germany. According to documents obtained by *Der Spiegel* magazine, the average age of Left Party members in their strongest region—East Germany—is over 65 years old. Since 2009, the party's membership figures have fallen from 78,000 to 71,000.

A comparison of the current Left Party slogans with their actual policies makes clear not only the true character of the party, but also reveals the utter contempt of this bureaucratic layer for the millions of ordinary Berliners who are suffering from the Senate's orgy of austerity measures.

"Good job, Berlin"

With this slogan, the Left Party demands "good wages and good conditions". They claim to have created 120,000 such jobs. In reality, 35,000 public sector jobs have been cut since 2001. And according to their campaign program, 16,000 further job cuts are to come.

After the Senate destroyed these permanent public-sector jobs, it created 30,000 "one-euro jobs", thereby increasing the profits of Germany's many highly profitable private temporary worker agencies. The austerity package introduced by the federal government in 2010 then withdrew funding for about half of these one-euro jobs.

The Berlin Senate reacted by establishing a job creation scheme (ÖBS) which offers no permanent secure jobs, but rather low-paid work subsidized by federal and local state funds. One third of these "job opportunities" offer a gross salary of just €1,300 a month.

The Senate has also massively reduced salaries, and worsened the working conditions of the public sector jobs that still remain. In 2003, it had already reduced public sector wages in Berlin by between 8 and 12 percent, and had slashed Christmas and holiday pay. In order to implement these cuts independently from existing accepted pay scales, the Berlin Senate was the first state to renounce membership of the national agreement, which obliges public service employers and employees to abide by contract conditions. In 2005, similar layoffs followed for 13,000 Berlin public transport workers. In both these cases, the Senate received backing from the public sector workers' union, Verdi.

"Protect tenants from the Wild-West"

This is another of the Left Party's slogans, which is supplemented with the words "more council houses and tenants' rights". The reality is that

the Left Party is itself responsible for the explosive rise in rental costs in Berlin. In just two years these have risen by an average of 7.9 percent. As a result, thousands of benefit claimants have had to give up their now overpriced flats and leave their neighbourhoods to resettle in outlying districts.

That is the balance sheet of 10 years of a SPD-Left Party Senate, which has privatized 150,000 council apartments. Those housing cooperatives that do remain are now obliged to run on a profit basis, and the construction of new council housing has been halted.

This abandonment of the provision of subsidized social housing has enabled massive rent increases.

“Privatisation is a catastrophe”

On this placard, the Left Party claims to stand for the “public control of electricity and water utilities, and public transport”. In fact, the very opposite is the case. The Senate not only partly privatized the city’s water utilities, but also honoured and renewed the “secret agreement” with the private energy companies, RWE and Veolia in 2003. These two big business companies were thus guaranteed profits at the expense of the population. The Left Party senator for commerce and industry, Harald Wolf, made this agreement behind closed doors. The contract has allowed regular rises in water bills in Berlin, leading to a 23 percent higher rate than in comparable cities. Meanwhile, RWE and Veolia have made profits of €1.3 billion from supplying water in Berlin.

When a widespread protest movement developed in opposition to these practices, and introduced the first ever successful referendum in Berlin forcing the Senate to either reveal the contents of their contract with energy companies or cancel it, the SPD and Left Party coalition quickly arranged talks with RWE and Veolia to persuade them that the de-privatization of water utilities could work to their advantage. Their current plan is to buy back the privatized shares by offering generous compensation. This is because the Senate wants to prevent the existing contract from being fully revealed to the public.

“More classes in the schools”

Under this demand stands the slogan “Better facilities, more teachers”. But in this regard, the Berlin Senate has made more education cuts than any other federal state. In the universities alone, spending cuts of €75 million have led to 216 professors being made redundant, nearly 500 university workers dismissed, entire faculties closed down and 10,000 student places lost. After introducing the new “higher-education laws” in Berlin this year, the Senate has now started implementing its “Uni-Lite program” in which teaching and research are made separate and only a handful of students are permitted to take a full master’s degree course.

In 2004 the Senate abolished the law guaranteeing the right to free access to learning resources for schoolchildren and students and simultaneously raised child day-care centre fees. As a result of the abolition of special employment conditions for older teachers (where they can work part-time), the average age of teachers in Berlin has risen from 48.4 years in 2003 to 50.6 years in 2011.

School staffing levels have been reduced to 100 percent, meaning that any teacher who is absent or sick cannot be covered and the classes must be cancelled. In addition, approximately 3 percent of teaching posts are currently unfilled. As for school premises, the backlog of necessary renovation work in classrooms has piled up to a repair bill of half a billion euros.

By merging secondary general schools with intermediate schools the Senate has cemented the special status of Gymnasias and thereby ensured a general worsening of conditions for many pupils in Berlin. The demand for genuine comprehensive schooling is not part of the election program of the Left Party.

“We are all Berlin”

On this placard is written in various languages “Equal rights for all”. The cultural diversity of Berlin is praised, although the life for immigrants in Berlin has been made increasingly difficult by the policies pursued by the Senate.

The Senate has not only deported thousands of refugees, it has also rejected a third of appeals from the special hardship cases commission. This commission investigates whether deportations are compatible with human rights and humanitarian considerations. The conditions in the city’s main deportation centre in Berlin-Köpenick are so inhumane that the inmates have gone on hunger strike three times—in 2002, 2003 and 2005.

But even when immigrants are granted residency status, the drastic spending cuts affect them particularly harshly. Already in 2006, the 21 percent unemployment rate amongst immigrants in the tinderbox district of Neukölln was considerably higher than the 14.5 percent rate for German citizens in Berlin.

The Left Party does not seem to have been particularly disturbed by the racist demagoguery of their senator for finance, Thilo Sarrazin (SPD). He was largely responsible for implementing all the above-described austerity measures. Furthermore, under their watch, the CCTV network has been vastly expanded in the capital.

As a result of the catastrophic effects of their policies upon local people, the Left Party has already lost about a half of their support compared to the last election. The latest results from the opinion poll institute Infratest dimap show support for the party to be just 12 percent, which would indicate a further loss of 1.4 percentage points.

The fact that any Berliners under the age of 60 should nevertheless indicate any electoral support for this bureaucratic and deeply anti-working-class movement can be explained by the campaigns of petty-bourgeois political groups, such as SAV or Marx21, who are putting all their energies into providing a left cover for the Left Party and organizing their election campaign.

In Berlin, the record clearly shows the role played by the Left Party. Like every other bourgeois party they represent the interests of the bankers and speculators against the people. They go to great lengths, however, to conceal these policies in a cloak of socialistic rhetoric. When they are no longer able to do this with any credibility the various small petty-bourgeois organizations come to their aid by providing further stocks of left-sounding phrases to their shrunken inventory.

This mechanism could also prove useful for the federal government. By taking a public stance in favour of Eurobonds recently, the Left Party chairperson, Gesine Löttsch, is openly offering the party’s services as coalition partner to the SPD and the Green Party. The proposed creation of a “European economic government” would entail massive attacks on workers in all EU countries, including Germany. In Berlin, the Left Party has already proved that it is a suitable coalition partner for implementing these policies.

It is high time that workers and youth, who are being affected by the unending social spending cuts, organize themselves on socialist principles independently in opposition to the SPD and Left Party. The only force to out forward this perspective in the current Berlin elections is the Socialist Equality Party—Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG)—German section of the Fourth International.

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