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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.06.2019

Left Party to enter state government in West Germany for the first time

“Bremen can be a signal for the national level,” rejoiced Left Party leader Katja Kipping after the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party decided by a large majority to form a coalition government in the city-state of Bremen. Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch added: “The Bremen Left can be proud, because this is a signal for national policy.” The Left Party had now “the responsibility to set course for a centre-left government.”

What are Kipping and Bartsch talking about?

On May 26, the former SPD-Green state government in Bremen was voted out of office due to its anti-working class policies. Now the Left Party is securing the two parties a new parliamentary majority and is joining the state government to enable it to continue its despised policies.

The SPD, which had ruled in Bremen for the past 73 years, was massively punished in the state election held three weeks ago. It lost almost 8 percent, receiving just under a quarter of the votes cast and ended up for the first time behind the CDU in Bremen. Although the Greens slightly increased their vote, in line with a nationwide trend, they were far from making up for the losses suffered by the SPD.

The reason for this decline is easy to detect. Under the leadership of SPD Mayor Carsten Sieling and Green finance senator Karoline Linnert, the “red-green” Senate has pursued a ruthless austerity course over the past 10 years. Although the country transfers around

€600 million a year to the banks in interest repayments alone—a ninth of the city's budget—Sieling is proud of the fact that he has rigorously adhered to the debt cap anchored in the state constitution and has already begun paying off the debt proper.

The result has been a social disaster. Bremen lies at the bottom of the 16 federal states in all social statistics. At 10 percent, the unemployment rate is more than twice the national average. In Bremerhaven, an exclave of Bremen, unemployment is nearly 13 percent. Of the state's 680,000 inhabitants, around 100,000 receive Hartz IV social benefits.

Bremerhaven is also the German region with the highest poverty rate, with 28.4 percent at risk of poverty in 2017 according to official statistics. In the city of Bremen, the rate was 21.9 percent.

In fact, Bremen as a whole is not poor, but rather deeply unequal. "In terms of economic output per inhabitant Bremen lies in second place behind Hamburg," the *Tagesspiegel* wrote. "In terms of disposable income, the state is right at the bottom. That means that many Bremen citizens do not benefit from the wealth."

The austerity program has left a trail of devastation in schools, day-care centres, hospitals, public services and transport infrastructure. In the schools alone, the bill for necessary repairs and modernisation stands at about €670 million. The consequences are "rain through the roof, windows that cannot be opened or closed, gyms that are run down," according to the head of the Bremen teacher's union, Ina von Boetticher.

At the beginning of the past school year, there was a shortage of around 100 teachers. The consequences are missed lessons, overworked staff, high levels of sick leave and often unbearable noise, due to dilapidated and overcrowded schools. Bremen's students invariably rank at the bottom in national statistics.

The decline of the once wealthy Hansa city began in the 1970s, with the active support of the SPD and the unions. Large companies such as the shipyards AG Weser and Bremer Vulkan, the consumer electronics manufacturer Nordmende, the textile manufacturer Bremer Woll-Kämmerei and the shipping companies, North German Lloyd and the German steamship company Hansa, were closed or shifted out of the state. In 1983, 2,000 workers tried to prevent the closure of the modern AG Weser shipyard with a dramatic occupation but were stabbed in the back by the IG Metall trade union and the SPD.

There are, however, still some large companies remaining in the city—such as the Mercedes plant with 12,500 employees and two companies involved in the aerospace industry, Airbus with 3,000 and OHB with 1,000 employees.

The Left Party is now joining the state government in Bremen to continue implementing austerity measures—notwithstanding its phraseology about “social” and “ecological” policies. Negotiations on the coalition agreement have only just begun, but as a precondition the Left Party has had to commit to respecting the debt cap. Without such a commitment, the SPD and the Greens would not have started the negotiations in the first place. Both parties could also form a coalition with the CDU.

The Left Party will also support the refugee policy and the buildup of state forces by the former red-green government. The SPD wants to expand video surveillance and is demanding “new investigative measures” for the police. The surveillance of telecommunications should become a “central instrument for the investigation of criminal offences and preventing dangerous situations.” The Left Party has already supported similar measures in the East German state of Thuringia, where the party occupies the post of state premier, and in Brandenburg, where it governs in a coalition with the SPD.

Bremen would be the first West German state where the Left Party participates in government. It will play the same role as it has done in the East German states where, in alliances with the SPD or with the SPD and the Greens, it has been a driving force in imposing welfare cuts and building a police-state.

The SPD-Left Party senate that governed in Berlin between 2002 and 2011 led the nation when it came to slashing thousands of public service jobs and hiving off hundreds of thousands of public owned housing units to finance sharks. In order to more effectively cut the wages of public service workers the Berlin Senate withdrew from the employers’ association. At the same time the administration led by Klaus Wowereit (SPD) pumped billions into the bankrupt Berlin Banking Company in order to rescue the speculative assets of the bank’s wealthy clientele.

The Left Party is reacting to growing social tensions and the decline of the SPD by throwing itself at the feet of the German ruling class and offering its services as a reliable prop.

The Left Party politician Christian Görke, who as finance minister in Brandenburg personally ensures adherence to the debt brake, told the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* that a “social policy” could only be implemented “for the time being with the SPD, not without them.” In fact, a “social policy” with the SPD means Hartz IV, retirement at 67, incessant social cuts, state rearmament and militarism.

Oskar Lafontaine, who broke with the SPD in 1999 and founded the Left Party in 2005, is reported to have argued for a merger of the Left Party and the SPD—at a time when the SPD has lost all its support in the working class due to its right-wing policies. The SPD polled a record low of 15 percent in the recent European election. Lafontaine’s proposal for a merger confirms that the Left Party was never more than a mere left fig leaf for the SPD. Its main objective was to prevent the development of a genuine left, i.e., socialist alternative.

A coalition of the Greens, SPD and Left Party at federal level, as wished for by Kipping and Bartsch, would be just as right-wing as the current grand coalition. It is one of the variants currently being discussed in ruling circles in order to continue the policy of social cuts, militarism and rearmament should the current grand coalition collapse.

The Green Party, which is presently experiencing an upsurge in elections and opinion polls, have been a tried and tested prop of the prevailing order for a long time. The party governs in several states in alliance with the CDU and is keeping all of its options open at a federal level.

Workers and youth can only defend their social and political rights and combat the danger of war and dictatorship by breaking with all of the bourgeois parties—including the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party—and taking up the fight against capitalism by building their own international socialist party—the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

17 June 2019