



German Homes Ltd: Yes to a referendum, Yes to expropriation!

Tomasz Jaroslaw/Veronika Schulz, Neue Internationale 258, Berlin, September 2021 Thu, 02/09/2021 - 17:02

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With some 250,000 valid signatures, the campaign "Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co." (DWE - Expropriate "German Homes and Co") achieved the best result ever for a Berlin referendum in June. This would not have been possible without thousands of activists and the involvement of large organisations such as the Left Party, the trade unions and the tenants' association. Surveys show that support for the socialisation of large private and profit-oriented housing corporations correlates not only with left-wing political opinions, but also with low incomes. Everything points to widespread approval and real roots in the working class.

The result means that, on 26 September, there will not only be a General Election but also the referendum on socialisation. Even if a victory at the ballot box would not be legally binding, it would send a strong signal after decades of privatisation and general attacks on social standards. It would put some pressure on the next Senate (Berlin state government), especially on the Greens, SPD and Left Party, whose members and voters have real sympathies for the idea of socialisation.

DIE LINKE, Greens and SPD: promises and actions

However, even with a successful referendum, the struggle would by no means be over: despite the positive pronouncements of the Greens, they are an openly bourgeois party that officially wants to use socialisation only as a "last resort", and would rather avoid it in practice. Thus, they favour sanctions for "bad" landlords while retaining private property and market economy dogmas. The SPD, on the other hand, has spoken out in favour of talks with DWE at its Berlin state party conference in 2019, but is against an actual implementation of socialisation. Accordingly, it tried other options instead, such as "build, buy, cap". That these concepts were too expensive, or all failed, need only be mentioned in passing. On the whole, the SPD and the Greens are oriented towards temporary, "public welfare-oriented", voluntary agreements with private real estate companies, for example the short-lived and already futile "Future and Social Pact" with the Vonovia group or a nationwide rent cap.

Of course, the SPD and the Greens have a very watered-down idea of a rent cap, more like a rent sieve. Moreover, they are always ready to soften their demands, or drop them altogether, if there are coalition negotiations with the conservative CDU and/or the market-liberal FDP. Last, but not least, despite all their promises, it is doubtful how energetically the SPD and the Greens will push through such projects nationally without a strong, nationwide movement challenging both parties politically and putting them under as much pressure as DWE has done in Berlin.

The SPD leadership around Müller and Giffey has repeatedly emphasised that it is against socialisation. This, of course, is encouraged not only by the real estate lobby, but also the CDU, FDP and AfD. Since most SPD voters and members voted for socialisation and that DWE's goal is politically nothing more than classic reformism, Giffey and Müller are not only opposing the interests of Berlin tenants and wage earners, but also the majority of their own party.

The SPD-Left and the Left Party must insist on a clear socialisation and administration law that follows DWE's guidelines in any coalition negotiations. If Müller and Giffey say that this would not work with them, the voters and tenants have to say: OK, then they will work without you!

The Left Party is too timid on this. It must make clear that it is fully behind socialisation. Although the trade unions support DWE politically, so far this has not been linked to any mobilisation of their base to maximise the pressure. On the other hand, their cooperation with the hospital movement has been very good and shows what could be possible. One thing is clear: housing is not the only basic need. Many areas of public services that have been privatised in the meantime, such as health care, need to be returned to the public sector and democratically controlled and administered by users and workers, and thus withdrawn from the logic of the market and profit.

After the referendum is before the struggle

If the referendum is successful, the struggle for socialisation will not be over, but just beginning. It is to be expected that the smear campaign against socialisation will continue to gain momentum. The Senate will try to evade responsibility and the will of the voters in different ways, depending on the strength of the different parties. Therefore, it will be important first and foremost not (only) to negotiate with the Senate on an appropriate law, but above all to put real pressure on it through a variety of measures:

- ? the Left Party should make socialisation a condition of any coalition
- ? strengthening the left wings of the Greens and SPD against their party leaderships and their representatives in the Senate, with resolutions from district and state party conferences
- ? building up and strengthening the tenants' movement and the tenants' association for mass mobilisation and rent boycotts.
- ? winning the trade unions to a campaign of political strikes.

A successful campaign would not only have immediate practical benefits for about 300,000 tenants in Berlin. The political signal it would send would have even greater relevance in Berlin and far beyond. It would not only be a blow against finance capital, but a powerful argument for expropriation and re-nationalisation, for example, in the health, transport and energy sectors.

What next?

So, the struggle must continue even after a referendum has been won. It needs a transformation of the campaign, building it in the neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools and universities and fighting for workers' and tenants' control over housing. In doing this, we must campaign for the complete expropriation of the big private property companies with as little compensation as possible and with control of redevelopment, new building and rents in the hands of tenants' and workers' organisations such as the unions. Rent boycotts, rent caps and political solidarity strikes by the unions can, as a first step, put pressure on the future state government to implement an appropriate expropriation and rent law. Finally, we need a nationwide tenants' movement for the solution of the problems in the housing sector and expropriation.

For a nationwide tenants' movement, based on the mass organisations of the workers' movement! As a first step, let's advocate a nationwide tenants' political action conference to discuss proposals to remedy the housing crisis and decide on an action plan and an organisation to fight for it!

For this we propose the following demands:

- Expropriation without compensation of the big real estate companies under workers' and tenants' control! Open their books to experts who have the trust of the tenants' and workers' movement!
- Rent control by tenants and trade unions!
- Away with racism and discrimination in the housing market: control and disclosure of housing allocation!
- For an environmentally sound social housing construction and renovation programme under workers' and tenants' control
- For comprehensive socialisation so that social property does not remain an island in the middle of a housing market sea!
- Reclaim what was public property and manage it on a cost-effective and non-profit basis!

Vote on 26 September for the expropriation of the big real estate companies!

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