

# Former SPD chairman's May Day speech creates problems for German government

## Lafontaine calls for a stop to the bombing of Yugoslavia

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The traditional demonstrations organised by the trade unions on the first of May have made clear that the German governing coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens is being increasingly torn apart by the continuing war against Yugoslavia.

Most members of the government encountered stiff opposition and were greeted by booing when they spoke at various May Day meetings held throughout Germany. The sharpest protests were reserved for SPD Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping at a meeting in Ludwigshafen. Following disputes between individual trade unions, the meeting was switched inside to a room where police violently removed a number of anti-Scharping protesters before the meeting got under way. Despite the police action Scharping was barely able to finish his speech, which was accompanied by piercing whistles and cries of "murderer".

Environment Minister Trittin, from the Green party, spoke in Göttingen, where he was active as a youth in a pro-Stalinist organisation. He was greeted with a chorus crying "war minister!" "murderer" and "hypocrite", and eggs were thrown as he spoke. Dieter Schulte, chairman of the German trade union movement DGB, also provoked booing when he defended the war at the central DGB meeting in Dortmund. A number of SPD and trade union speakers up and down the country received similar treatment.

The most attention was drawn by the May Day meeting in Saarbrücken, where Oskar Lafontaine was the main speaker. Instead of the usual 5,000 a total of 12,000 turned up, including numerous journalists. Since resigning all political positions at the beginning of March without giving a reason, Lafontaine has severed all contact with the government and made no public

statement on political questions. Many in the SPD leadership were therefore nervous that he could now attempt to stab the government in the back.

At the event, Lafontaine sharply criticised the present government and called for an immediate stop to the bombing. A number of errors had been made in Yugoslavia, he said, many going back years. He named in particular the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia insisted on by the German government against "resistance in Paris, London and Washington". It was wrong "to award recognition to these mini-states which based themselves on ethnic differences," he said.

He recalled that "not just one group suffered expulsion in the multinational state of Yugoslavia". The Serbs were also the victims of expulsion policies. He was thoroughly convinced "that we cannot proceed on the basis of demonising one ethnic group while appointing another to the side of the good guys."

On the political field, Lafontaine said, the government and NATO had made two "serious mistakes": The UN had been pushed to the side and the present weakness of Russia had been used to ostracise the country. Those who were seeking peace had to strengthen the law and "international law can only be constituted by the United Nations, not by others who take it upon themselves." Without Russia there could be no peace in the world, he continued.

He also criticised the military actions. As a member of the government he had insisted that the military plans be thoroughly discussed before being agreed. This had not, however, taken place before he resigned. If the protection of the population of Kosovo was the most important aim of the military operation, "then the military operation at the present is for me

incomprehensible, in every aspect incomprehensible." The NATO countries had, in his opinion, "landed in a dead-end". Bombardment was "a form of collective punishment. Increasing numbers of innocent people will be the victims of the bombing."

Unlike those who spoke in favour of the war, Lafontaine's speech was applauded frenetically.

Lafontaine's public appearance against the war encouraged a number of others in the SPD to express their own criticisms. Up until now the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor of the ruling Stalinist party of the GDR, has been the only party to openly oppose the war in the German parliament. With just a few exceptions the deputies of the SPD and the Green party had fallen into line with government discipline and kept quiet--although a number of them had their reservations. Now Lafontaine has articulated the thoughts of many inside not only the government camp but also the conservative opposition. For some time the CDU/CSU Union and the Liberal FDP have been warning of the consequences of an escalating war.

In these circles the exclusion of the UN by an US-dominated NATO is regarded as an attempt to establish American domination of Europe for the foreseeable future. For the same reason they fear the weakening of Russia: In the past, as a counterweight to America, Russia gave German and European foreign policy some room to manoeuvre. This is lost if Russia is weakened. In addition, the worsening of relations with Russia threatens to destabilise all of east Europe where Germany has its own massive economic interests.

Under conditions where the war is being increasingly rejected by broad layers of the population, Lafontaine has created considerable problems for the government. According to the *Berliner Zeitung* substantial conflicts developed between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has succeeded Lafontaine as chairman of the party, and other members of the party executive at a meeting on May 3. A number of executive members criticised the government's handling of the Kosovo war. Schröder was offended, reacting irritably and patronisingly, only to be met with indignation on the part of his critics. According to one participant, "He has not been accepted as the head of the party because he does not deport himself like one."

In the meantime, an increasing number of prominent

party members have expressed their opposition to the war.

Peter von Oertzen, for many years a member of the SPD leadership and now 75 years old, compared the present position of the party with regard to Kosovo to the situation in 1914, when the SPD voted for war credits and drew Germany into the First World War--an action which had "disastrous consequences for German politics and the German working class". He warned that "intolerance and the uncritical hanging on to initial mistakes can lead to a development as terrible as that 85 years ago."

The Willy Brandt circle of the SPD has published a statement in which it declares that the war is incompatible with the constitution. It has been signed by, amongst others, Peter Brandt, son of the SPD veteran, and Gunther Gaus. In the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Ehrhart Körting (SPD), justice minister for the state of Berlin, maintained that the bombing of bridges, factories and radio and TV stations is not covered by international law and that, therefore, the bombing in Serbia and Montenegro cannot be legitimised. Manfred Stolpe, the SPD prime minister for the state of Brandenburg, accused NATO of making a "dramatic, strategic mistake".

The Green party, which is holding a special conference on the issue of the war on May 13, has increasing difficulties because of Lafontaine's stand. With ambiguous motions and discreet warnings of the possible loss of office and privileges, the executive committee appeared to have secured a majority for the government's war course. Now the opponents of the war in the party have received new impetus. A majority in the party against the war would certainly mean the end of the coalition government.

In any case, one thing is clear: the longer the war continues the more insecure is the position of the coalition in Bonn. If the bombing continues and intensifies for weeks the coalition can hardly expect to survive. And this could lead to the possible break-up of the Greens, and even the SPD.



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