

New name, old program

German Party of Democratic Socialism renames itself “The Left Party”

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Earlier this month, delegates at a special congress held in Berlin decided to change the name of their party from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) to “The Left Party.”

The renaming is first and foremost a concession to the PDS’s new running mate, the Election Alternative (WASG), which made a change of name a condition for running a joint slate in the elections for the German parliament (Bundestag) expected in September. Since German electoral law does not permit electoral alliances, the two parties were required to arrive at an agreement to permit candidates of the WASG to stand on the electoral lists of the Party of Democratic Socialism.

The Party of Democratic Socialism and the WASG intend to fully unify during the next parliamentary session. The WASG’s demand that its ally change its name was aimed at rebutting claims that it was merely being assimilated into the PDS. However, any comparison of membership figures for the two organisations (85,000 for the Party of Democratic Socialism, 4,000 members for the WASG) makes clear that a name change alone cannot preclude this danger.

For the Party of Democratic Socialism, the alliance with the WASG offers the prospect of the PDS finally obtaining political influence in west Germany, where it has never been able to acquire a proper foothold. The name change also offers the PDS a welcome opportunity to establish an artificial divide between the demands and policies of the new “Left Party” and the policy and practice of the old PDS.

The renaming of the SED (Socialist Unity Party—the Stalinist ruling party of former East Germany) as the Party of Democratic Socialism in 1989 was the first

attempt by the PDS to rid itself of past political ballast. The PDS has, however, remained true to its Stalinist roots and sought to quash any independent movement of the working class.

While the party is currently loudly criticising the anti-social policies of Germany’s ruling SPD-Green Federal Government, it has been closely involved in the implementation and extension of precisely the same policies in those regions where it is part of the government. A brief glimpse of conditions in the German capital Berlin—governed for more than three years by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the PDS—speaks volumes in this regard.

More than half a million citizens of Berlin (of approximately 3.5 million inhabitants) live below the official poverty line and are forced to survive on an income of less than 600 euros per month. The official unemployment ratio is around 20 percent, and approaches 30 percent in some districts of the city.

The wages and salaries of public service workers and others employed by the city council are under permanent attack. Within the past few months, the city council in collaboration with the trade unions forced through a 10 percent wage cut for city transit workers. At the same time, communal facilities, including childcare provision and education, have been subjected to a continual onslaught of cuts and increased fees. As a result, there is widespread anger and discontent over the PDS’s role in the city.

Against this background, it comes as no real surprise that this latest name change was supported by a large majority of congress delegates—74.6 percent. Little effort was required to persuade those in attendance to ditch the name PDS, and there was little in the way of

real political debate—either in the run-up to the conference or at the congress itself.

Speeches by delegates and party leaders at the special congress were essentially limited to presenting the favorable odds of winning parliamentary representation for an alliance of the Party of Democratic Socialism and WASG. Opinion polls currently estimate that up to 11 percent of voters in west Germany and 30 percent in the east of the country would be prepared to vote for the alliance. This would make the Left Party the organisation with the largest electoral support in the east.

With the crisis of parliamentary democracy in Germany intensifying and the influence of social democracy significantly weakened, the Party of Democratic Socialism now feels obliged to extend its role as guarantor of civil order in the east to Germany as a whole. To this end, party delegates welcomed the chance to sweep some past sins under the carpet and pose as a party making a fresh start.

The impression was given that the Left Party represents something new in German politics that should at least be given a chance in the Bundestag. In reality, the same decrepit and discredited organisation lies behind the new name. As the ruling party in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), the SED ruthlessly suppressed working class opposition. In its PDS incarnation, this party emerged during the period of German unification as the most important political force for diverting working class opposition and thereby securing civic order in the east of the country. Now, in the form of the Left Party, it strives to play the same role on the national stage—under conditions in which the Social Democratic Party of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder lacks the authority to do so.

The only real change is that the PDS has opened up its ranks to a group of former SPD members and trade union bureaucrats from western Germany who have long shared the PDS's antipathy to any independent political movement of the working class.



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