

# Germany: why is the “Left Party” winning growing support in the opinion polls?

Ulrich Rippert  
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With former Social Democrat Oskar Lafontaine and the former leader of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), Gregor Gysi, installed as the organisation’s primary candidates in the upcoming general election, the recently formed “Left Party”—an electoral bloc of Election Alternative (WASG) and the PDS—is seeing its poll ratings rise.

According to a recent poll conducted by Forsa, the Left Party is supported by 12 percent of voters, far outstripping the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens, who each have 7 percent. If this result were confirmed in September’s Bundestag (federal parliament) election, the Left Party would emerge as Germany’s third strongest party.

In the former East Germany, it is already considered the strongest party. In the East, the Party of Democratic Socialism, which emerged out of the former ruling Stalinist party, was already far stronger than the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Now, however, with 30 percent, the Left Party has overtaken the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which registered 29 percent support in the former East Germany. In the Saarland, in the West, where Lafontaine had been a long-standing state premier, a forecast in mid July already gave the Left Party 20 percent. These high poll ratings have certainly surprised Lafontaine and Gysi.

All the other parties in the Bundestag have reacted to this development with a combination of nervousness and political vituperation. Politicians from the ruling SPD are calling Lafontaine a “hate-monger” who is encouraging social envy. In an editorial, *Die Zeit* posed the rhetorical question: “Does Germany need a Left Party?” It answered, “No, and once again no!” In the same edition, Liane von Billerbeck accused Lafontaine of being a two-faced “Janus figure” who lives in “a fancy mansion in the Saarland, taking the money from *Bild* newspaper and then shouting his mouth off here.”

The main criticism directed against Lafontaine is that he is a populist who gives expression to popular opinion. Lafontaine demagogically attacks the government’s “Hartz IV” labour reforms and “Agenda 2010” welfare cuts, and denounces the enrichment of those at the top of society while broad sections of the population are increasingly worse off. Many politicians and journalists regard this as sacrilege—even though they call the people “politically sovereign” and speak of parliamentarians as “representatives of the people.”

However, their attacks have not had the desired effect. The more strongly the establishment attacks Lafontaine and Gysi, the more the poll numbers for the Left Party climb.

In reality, the rage of the politicians and the media is directed at something more than the leading politicians of the Left Party, who for decades have worked within the political establishment and are well

known quantities. Neither Lafontaine nor Gysi has made a secret of the fact that they unreservedly defend the existing bourgeois social order. Something far more fundamental is worrying the ruling elite. The increased poll ratings for the Left Party expose the fact that broad sections of the population oppose the growth of social inequality and are moving to the left politically.

In a recent article, the usually conservative *Welt am Sonntag* pointed to this development. Under the headline, “The Yearning for Leftwing Politics” the newspaper wrote, “It is not just their populism that has made Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine successful. The country has changed, and the SPD lacks the answers.”

The tabloid continued, declaring that “capitalism has fallen into disrepute.” Nearly five million unemployed, falling real incomes, including those of pensioners, deep cuts in the social safety net, and the fear of “cheap competition” from abroad have re-animated the “need for explicitly leftwing politics.”

The newspaper then quoted a study by Bielefeld University, which revealed that over 90 percent of Germans believe that “the rich always get richer, the poor always become poorer.” The study reports that the assets of the richest 25 percent of Germans in the west of the country rose by 27.5 percent from 1993 to 2004, whereas the poorest 25 percent saw their assets decrease by 50 percent. In East Germany, the richest quartile increased its wealth by 86 percent, while that of the poorest quartile fell by 21 percent.

These numbers clearly reveal the effects of the radical welfare cuts of recent years. The widely praised German welfare state is cutting every corner, radically limiting health and old-age provisions. The unemployed and those with low earnings are increasingly unable to afford the extensive additional payments required. Conditions in East Germany, in particular, are becoming increasingly intolerable. Although many people of working age and their families have moved, or commute to work in West Germany or the European Union, the official unemployment rate, at 20 percent, is twice as high in the East as in the West.

Many people are bitter and feel completely deceived. After the promise of a “blossoming landscape in the East” made by former chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) in 1990 proved to be a pretence, many East Germans set their hopes seven years ago on an SPD-led coalition government with the Green Party. Gerhard Schröder (SPD) won the 1998 election largely with the help of East German voters. But in office, his government accelerated the economic and social decline.

Last year, in Leipzig, Chemnitz, Magdeburg and many other East German cities, thousands took to the streets and protested against the Hartz IV labour reforms. Schröder and Joschka Fischer (Green Party) answered by saying there was no alternative to the social cuts. Now,

many voters believe Lafontaine and the Left Party provide some sort of means of protesting against their social misery and expressing their umbrage.

However, it would be wrong to equate the increasing resistance of the general population and the political goals of the Left Party. These represent two different developments heading in opposed directions.

While many voters seize every possibility to protest against the anti-social policies of the Schröder-Fischer government and are looking for a real improvement in their daily lives, Lafontaine's sometimes harsh criticism of the federal government is aimed at placing him at the head of the protests in order to keep them under control and channel them in a harmless direction.

This is why he takes every opportunity to stress that the coming together of WASG and PDS has already "achieved more than many thought possible," as he said in his speech at last Sunday's state convention which approved him as lead candidate of the Left Party in North Rhine Westphalia.

The SPD and the Greens had adopted a "far clearer leftwing tone" in their election programme, Lafontaine declared, and disavowed the gravest iniquities of Agenda 2010. According to Lafontaine, that is a success, and shows the sort of "political force" that a strong leftwing opposition in parliament can affect.

Both of these statements are false. The SPD has not moved to the left, nor will an opposition in the Bundestag led by Lafontaine and Gysi hinder further social attacks.

Chancellor Schröder and SPD Chairman Müntefering have made clear that they will hold fast to a policy of social cuts. It was for this reason that the Bundestag election was brought forward. When Agenda 2010 encountered increasing resistance, Schröder sought a new mandate, or, alternately, was prepared to hand over the government to the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats, for them to pursue the same course with even more vigour.

In reality, the whole political establishment has moved to the right. This can be seen in the frenetic way the state is being armed in the name of the "war against terrorism," about which the Left Party has said hardly anything.

The few cosmetic policy corrections that the SPD has included in its programme for electioneering purposes are ridiculous. The call for a "millionaires' tax"—a three percent additional levy on those earning above €500,000 a year—does not even restore the highest tax rate as of 1998. And an incoming government is under no obligation from such promises, something Lafontaine knows only too well, since he was responsible for drawing up the programme that helped Schröder win the 1998 Bundestag elections.

The fact that Lafontaine calls such a sham a "leftwing development" says more about him than about the SPD. An auxiliary tax for high earners is supposed to give the appearance of social justice and balance. That is a farce.

It is not necessary to speculate upon the role of the Left Party as a parliamentary opposition or in a future coalition with the SPD and the Greens. A glance at Berlin and Mecklenburg Pomerania should suffice, where the Left Party rules in a coalition with the SPD in the state legislature, or Saxony, Saxony Anhalt and Brandenburg, where it is the largest opposition grouping in the state parliament.

What has improved for the general population in these states? Nothing. What social cutbacks have been prevented? None. Wherever the PDS—now relabelled the Left Party—holds government positions and thereby bears political responsibility, it ruthlessly implements the same anti-social policies. It only differs from the other parties in the

fact that the arrogance and self-conceit of the former East German party of state is still apparent in many of its functionaries.

It is already clear that at a federal level, the Left Party will play the same role as the PDS does at a regional level. It is not possible to oppose the internationally operating corporations and global financial markets, which dictate the programme of every government, without questioning the capitalist basis of their power and mobilizing a broad movement of working people against it. The tremendous arrogance with which the business press and various "economic experts" call for greater social cuts demonstrates that the era of social compromises and concessions is finally over.

But the Left Party eschews an open confrontation with those who hold the economic and political power. That was clear six years ago, when Lafontaine resigned his positions as minister of finance and SPD chairman when he faced pressure from the employers' associations, backed by the chancellor. He was not prepared to stand up to them and resigned without giving any reason.

At that time, an open struggle on his part could have mobilised broader social layers but that was precisely what Lafontaine did not want. He was the chairman of the largest and oldest party in Germany, the SPD, and was the most influential minister in Schröder's government. Everything he is calling for today, he could have carried out at that time. Instead, he threw in the towel.

Similarly, three years ago, Gysi resigned as a state legislator in Berlin, giving only the most threadbare of explanations. He had been the PDS's leading candidate in state elections, after the CDU and SPD were heavily implicated in a banking scandal. After the election, the PDS formed a coalition with the SPD, which pumped billions into saving the Bankgesellschaft Berlin, while implementing a massive programme of cuts in social spending and public services.

Gysi was obviously afraid that if he were too closely identified with the policies of the Berlin state legislature he could become too discredited to be able to play a future role in national politics, and he resigned after a few months.

What is required is a socialist perspective that unites working people worldwide against the profit system. Lafontaine, Gysi and the Left Party stridently reject such a perspective. They expressly declare that they are not questioning the continued existence of capitalism, but call for a return to the policy of social reconciliation within the national framework, as in the 1970s.

In the age of globalization, however, that is impossible. The attempt to defend jobs, wages and social benefits within a national framework is not only illusory, but leads in a completely reactionary direction. This can be clearly seen in Lafontaine's call for the state to prevent "fathers and women from becoming unemployed because immigrant workers who are prepared to accept low wages take their jobs."

It only remains to stress that it is this nationalism that binds him with Gysi and the PDS. From the 1946 founding in East Berlin of the forerunner to the PDS, the Socialist Unity Party, to the building of the Berlin Wall fifteen years later, this party has periodically renamed itself. Today it still embodies the narrow-minded forms of Stalinist nationalism.



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