

Germany's Left Party adopts a reformist program

Peter Schwarz
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At a party congress held in Berlin on August 27, Germany's recently founded Left Party adopted its program for the federal election due to take place on September 18.

As is the case with Germany's other political parties, Saturday's meeting, held in the middle of the election campaign, was mainly aimed at drumming up publicity. The eight-hour congress was transmitted in full length by the television channel Phoenix and attended by dozens of journalists and photographers.

At the heart of meeting were the half-hour speeches by the party's two leading candidates, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. Just one hour was planned for the subsequent debate and vote among more than 300 delegates on amendments. In the event, the congress extended the period by thirty minutes.

It is characteristic that the thirty-page election program which was agreed at the congress with just two dissenting votes never mentions the word "socialism". The program consists of a catalog of proposals for social and political reforms which one formerly found—and can still partially find today—in the programs of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and even the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The existing economic and social order is not challenged. Rather, the basic thread of the entire program is that another policy would be possible within the context of capitalism if only politicians desired it. The program does not oppose the capitalist social order as such, but only a specific form of capitalist policy, "neo-liberalism," to which it counterposes an alternative, more socially conscious, form of capitalist policy.

"It cannot be" and "it should not be" were the most frequent idioms employed by Lafontaine in his speech whenever he denounced social abuses. But Lafontaine never posed the question why things are the way they are. To pose this question does not mean justifying existing conditions. Quite the opposite—one can remedy social evils only when one is clear about their cause.

The figure of Karl Marx was omnipresent at the congress. Time and time again speakers referred to the "old man with the beard", who last week was featured on the front page of Germany's most popular news magazine, *Der Spiegel*. However, the representatives of the Left Party totally reject the most important discovery made by Marx, which he scientifically proved in his seminal work, *Capital*: i.e., that the capitalist system, driven by its own inherent contradictions, inevitably leads to social crises, because private ownership of the means of production is incompatible with the social and international character of the modern productive forces.

Paradoxically, the Left Party demonstrates more confidence in the ability of the capitalist system to overcome social evils than the most enthusiastic advocates of the "free market." While the latter emphasize that further wage cuts and reductions in social welfare benefits are indispensable in order to ensure the functioning of the capitalist economy, the Left Party maintains that the economic crisis can be overcome by increasing mass purchasing power.

"Jobs can be secured, unemployment can be pushed back only when the following principle is considered in economic policy: Without demand there can be no growth and no jobs. Therefore, the purchasing power of the population in the domestic market must be strengthened," the election program declares.

Confronted with the global capitalism of the 21st century, the Left Party advocates the type of Keynesian policies that prevailed in the 1960s.

The most striking proof that such prescriptions are illusory is the shift to the right by social democracy. This is an international phenomenon. Along with the SPD, all other social democratic parties have switched to a neo-liberal course.

Beginning with New Labor under Tony Blair through to the Workers Party of Lula in Brazil, there is not a single social reformist party worldwide—at least among those that hold political power—which strives to implement any significant improvements for working people. In France, the Socialist Party managed to discredit itself during five years in power under Lionel Jospin to such an extent that the right wing could return to power with an overwhelming majority.

The general character of this phenomenon indicates it has deeper causes than Lafontaine and the Left Party care to admit. They merely refer to the personal responsibility of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other social democratic leaders.

The globalization of production and a deep crisis of world capitalism have stripped away the foundations for social democratic policies aimed at social reconciliation. Denied the possibility of defending bourgeois society by reconciling opposed class interests, social democracy has gone over to open attacks on the working class and has unreservedly lined up with big business. Instead of reconciling workers to capitalism with reforms, their policy now consists of rescuing bourgeois society by dismantling past reforms.

The Left Party is unable to deal with this issue, because it seeks itself to foster new illusions in the social reformist perspective which has failed so miserably. Notwithstanding the many differences and tensions which exist within the Left Party, this topic remained taboo at the party congress.

Congress delegates argued virulently over whether they should demand a minimum wage of 1,000 euro net or 1,400 euro gross—which turns out to be approximately the same—but they tacitly agreed that these and all other demands contained in the election program were not to be linked to a socialist perspective opposing the bourgeois order.

According to the chairman of the party, Lothar Bisky, as expressed in his introductory speech, the mere presence of the Left Party in the German parliament (Bundestag) would be sufficient to force the other parties to adopt a more conciliatory social policy.

"Our suggestions put pressure on red-green (the SPD and the Green Party) and black-yellow (the conservative opposition parties and the 'free-market' Free Democratic Party)," said Bisky. "Our presence and our experience are putting real pressure on these parties. We sense it: A Left Party can have an effect in parliament and for the people of this country. It

can use the strength of the weak for social reforms, for reforms which really deserve the name.”

Bisky did not even exclude a future fusion with the SPD. “Should the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) govern in a coalition with the FDP (Free Democratic Party)—as some opinion polls have predicted—the development of the SPD is open,” he said. While he did not believe that the present-day social democracy could make “an immediate switch to consistent democratic socialism,” an “increase in the number of social alternatives” should nevertheless be welcomed. “Exclusion,” he concluded, “should be left to the last supporters of the cold war.”

Bisky is spreading dangerous illusions. Irrespective of the election result, it is certain that the entire official political spectrum, including the SPD, will continue to move to the right after the Bundestag election on September 18.

The circumstances which led to the election alone are sufficient to demonstrate this. Schröder expressly argued for the early dissolution of the Bundestag on the basis of seeking a new mandate for his deeply unpopular social program (“Agenda 2010”), from which he will not budge. Otherwise, according to his implicit threat, he will hand over government to the conservative opposition and the FDP, which plan even more drastic attacks on past social gains, with the introduction of a flat tax and other measures aimed at destroying Germany’s health and welfare system.

The rapid aggravation of the international crisis that has its center in the US makes violent class conflict absolutely inevitable—including in Germany. The gigantic foreign trade and budgetary deficits of the US and associated imbalances in the world economy, the debacle in Iraq and the determination of Washington to defend its global supremacy through military means are intensifying international tensions. German and European imperialism react with their own turn to a belligerent and aggressive foreign policy.

The struggle for spheres of influence, raw materials and markets has a high price, which—as was the case in the first half of the past century—will have to be paid for by working people. Attacks on democratic and social rights on a scale unknown since the period of the 1930s are on the agenda. These—and not some personal infatuation of politicians with “neoliberalism”—are the fundamental causes of such measures as the Agenda 2010 program and the insatiable demands by big business.

A look at the US is instructive. There, Northwest Airlines has just confronted its flight mechanics with an ultimatum—a 25 percent wage cut, the dismissal of half the workforce, as well as substantial cuts in pension entitlements. Otherwise, the company threatens bankruptcy proceedings which could lead to the loss of all jobs and pension rights. In order to achieve its demands, Northwest provoked a strike and invested millions of dollars to train strike-breakers. The flight mechanics stand alone. All other trade unions have carried out strike breaking.

Is it possible for such a development to take place in Germany? Indeed it is—in fact, on the basis of the economic and political world situation, such developments are inevitable.

The most important task of a socialist party consists of preparing the working class for these inevitable class conflicts. It must call things by their right name and oppose any illusions that the assault on social and democratic rights can be thwarted through pressure on the SPD or other bourgeois parties.

This is the basis for participation in the Bundestag elections of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). In its election manifesto, the PSG declares: “We are participating in these elections in order to prepare the way for a broad political mass movement throughout Europe which is directed against the capitalist system... Without the political intervention of working people, it is impossible to stop these reactionary developments and prevent their catastrophic consequences.”

It is only in such a context that demands for social reforms, as can be found in the election program of the Left Party, make any sense. Such demands can be carried out only by a workers’ government which undertakes far-reaching measures to supplant private ownership of the means of production with public ownership under the control of the working class.

Rosa Luxemburg, who like Marx is frequently quoted but not understood by the Left Party, made this point succinctly in her polemic against the progenitor of reformism, Eduard Bernstein. The “final goal of socialism,” she wrote in *Reform or Revolution*, “constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the social democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism, the only factor transforming the entire labor movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle *against* this order, for the suppression of this order.”

The Left Party is clearly dedicated to the “vain effort to repair the capitalist order.” A large part of its election propaganda consists of assertions that their program is “realistic” and can be “financed.” By this it means that it can be carried out without interfering with capitalist relations. Internationally, according to the election program, the negative effects of globalization can be countered by “a comprehensive democratization of international organizations such as the IMF and World Bank.”

Such assertions have a similar effect to that of valium. They encourage illusions in the ability of capitalism to reform itself, and serve to disarm the working class in the face of the dangers it faces. Such a policy based on fostering illusions inevitably leads to disillusionment, which, in turn, benefits reaction and creates moods which can be exploited by ultra-right forces.

In this respect, the Left Party proceeds in an extremely conscious and cynical fashion. This could be seen simply by looking out the windows of the congress center. The modern and luxurious Strel convention center is situated in the Berlin district of Neukölln amidst the ruins of shuttered industrial plants, where unemployment stands at 23 percent. For nearly four years Berlin has been governed by a coalition of the SPD and the Party of Democratic Socialism, which now calls itself the Left Party. The consequences for the population of the policies of the coalition in Berlin read like a counter-draft to the election program of the Left Party.

One example: The program contains a sub-heading, “Against child poverty: Each child should have a good start in life!,” and contains the following demands: “Nurseries free of charge for all children; unrestricted right to education, education and care from the outset; complete daycare for children of every age, so that both parents, but also single parents, can be gainfully employed; a good start for all children through kindergarten education, the employment of trained specialists and intensive language training in the schools.”

This is how reality looks: According to a recent welfare organization report, 30 percent of children in Berlin live in poverty. Parents are fighting a rapid degradation of care and training opportunities. Under the SPD and the Party of Democratic Socialism charges for nursery places have increased by 40 percent, staff has been cut back so drastically as to reduce nurseries and kindergartens to little more than detention centers, while financing for schools has been continually cut back.

Naturally, this topic was taboo at the election congress. After all, the Left Party had a chance of winning sufficient votes to “enter parliament with faction status”—a point reiterated time and again to counter any critical voices. This was a chance which should not be passed up.

At the same time, on the information table of the party’s Rosa Luxemburg Foundation it was possible to find a balance sheet of the Berlin coalition drawn up by, amongst others, Michael Brie, a man who is regarded as a leading theoretician in the elaboration of the program of the Left Party. The document reads: “SPD-PDS government policies had to

come to terms with a framework laid down permanently by neo-liberalism. Rapid changes, in particular in the fields of budget, economic and social policy, are therefore not possible.”

Even if it were not Brie’s intention, it would be hardly possible to find a more devastating indictment of the Left Party’s election program.

Oskar Lafontaine, who up until 1999 was chairman of the SPD and after forty years of membership finally resigned from the party this spring, spoke for the first time to a congress of the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism. He recently joined the Election Alternative (WASG), which is standing candidates on the lists of the Left Party and is seeking to officially amalgamate with the latter as soon as possible after the election.

Lafontaine described his appearance at the congress as a “historic date.” He saw it “in the context of the history of the workers’ movement,” and said he was proud to be able to participate in a “voluntary” unification of the German left.

He was alluding to the unification of the German Communist Party (KPD) and the SPD, which took place in the east zone of Germany in 1946. Arising from the unification of the two organizations was the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which became the Stalinist party of government in post-war East Germany. The post-war West German SPD has always condemned this merger as a “forced unification.” The reality, however, was more complex.

The leadership of the SPD in Berlin, at that time under Otto Grotewohl, was quite prepared to unify, and had originally vehemently demanded such a union. The KPD and SPD leaderships had a common interest in combating widespread support by workers for socialist-type measures and opposing any independent political movement. The conflict between the SED and the working class erupted openly with the workers’ rebellion of June 17, 1953.

The SPD, however, had miscalculated when it believed that it would be allowed some room for maneuver by the arch-Stalinists in the KPD leadership. With the initiation of the cold war, critical SPD members were systematically punished and suppressed. Many fled to the West. While the SPD was incapable of re-emerging in East Germany, in the Federal Republic (West Germany) it developed a rabidly anti-communist stance.

Tensions rooted in this history were still to be found at the Left Party congress. A large part of the aged membership of the Party of Democratic Socialism dates from the Stalinist SED, while the WASG consists largely of long-time social democrats and union officials, who turned their back on the SPD only after the latter introduced its “Agenda 2010” program of welfare cuts.

The main speakers were obviously concerned to play down such divisions. Lafontaine began his contribution by praising the Party of Democratic Socialism’s honorary chairman, Hans Modrow, who for many years was the leading SED functionary in the city of Dresden and was the last SED prime minister of East Germany. For his part, Gysi defended Lafontaine at some length against charges raised by Germany’s yellow press that he was a “luxury-left.”

But despite all the efforts to represent the union of the Party of Democratic Socialism and the WASG as a new beginning and the unification of the left-wing workers’ movement, it is nothing of the kind. The unification which has taken place is between the leftovers of two sclerotic bureaucratic apparatuses which are undertaking a last attempt to divert resistance against welfare cuts and unemployment into a reformist dead end.

As Marx wrote so aptly: “Hegel remarked somewhere that all great world-historical events occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”





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