

# Divisions emerge in Germany's Left Party

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On February 25, members of the Berlin Election Alternative for Employment and Social Justice (WASG) decided by a large majority to stand independent candidates in the Berlin state government elections to be held September 17. The decision is a slap in the face for the Left Party, which is in the process of fusing with the WASG and proposes to stand its own candidates in the Berlin election.

The Left Party came into being at a congress in July 2005 when the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor to the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany) renamed itself and opened up its ranks to members of the Election Alternative, which is based mainly in the west of Germany.

Of the 142 delegates at the WASG convention in Berlin, 91 voted in favor of the resolution for a separate candidacy from the Left Party. The decision must be now ratified by a vote of the WASG's total membership of 820 in Berlin, to be decided by March 7.

A similar issue arose in the eastern German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where the regional organization of the WASG resolved that any joint candidacy of the WASG and the Left Party in state elections was dependent on the Left Party quitting the state government, where it governs in coalition with the SPD (Social Democratic Party). A final decision on the question is to be taken at a conference of state members of the WASG at the beginning of April.

The Left Party reacted in both states by immediately putting a halt to the fusion discussions aimed at uniting the two organizations by the year 2007. The chairman of Berlin branch of the Left Party, Klaus Lederer, accused the Berlin WASG of “bailing out of the project for a new Left Party,” and his party colleague Kay Spiess, speaking on behalf of the Left Party in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, stated: “We can no longer continue discussions with one another on this

basis.”

The national chairman of the Left Party, Lothar Bisky, urged that WASG members not let political differences stand in the way of an alliance of the two organizations. Speaking on German radio, he warned that local opposition to a united Left Party comprising the Party of Democratic Socialism and the WASG would damage the national project and weaken the left in Germany.

The background to the dispute is the thoroughly right-wing policies of the Left Party in the two German states where it shares power. In both Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the Left Party/PDS governs in a coalition with the SPD, and in both states it has played a prominent role in far-reaching attacks on the working class.

In Berlin, the SPD-PDS coalition has made its priority the implementation of drastic budget cuts at the expense of the population as a whole. Over the last four years, it has cut more than 15,000 jobs in the public service and slashed the state's salary budget by more than 500 million euros.

To ensure it would not have to accept the terms of a wage agreement worked out by the public service union Verdi, the Berlin Senate decided in January 2003 to withdraw from the association of local employers. The Senate was then able to impose wage cuts of between 8 and 12 percent. Meanwhile, the official unemployment rate in the German capital has risen to 18.6 percent, and over 530,000 citizens live below the official poverty level of 600 euros per month.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the consolidation of the state budget was also carried out at the expense of the living standards of working families. Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has the lowest wages of all the states in eastern Germany. In addition, 41 percent of those working lack a proper labor contract—the highest rate in the east.

The official unemployment level is 22.1 percent, and the number of people dependent on welfare handouts has increased under the SPD-PDS coalition by approximately 6,000, to over 70,000.

On a national level, the WASG has sought to studiously ignore such facts and present the Left Party as some sort of social alternative, but for the regional organizations in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania this task is not so easy. Practically no one in these states would look upon the WASG as a possible alternative to the official policy of welfare cuts if it went ahead with plans to fuse with the discredited Left Party/PDS, which carries out precisely such cuts.

Besides threatening the national plans for fusion, the stance adopted by the two state WASG organizations endangers the activities of the two organizations in the German parliament (Bundestag). According to parliamentary protocol, deputies from two organizations that have merged can create a joint parliamentary faction only if the parties involved do not compete with one another at the state level.

The majority of the Left Party parliamentary faction is comprised of members of the former PDS, but there is little doubt that if faced with the loss of their lucrative parliamentary posts, the WASG deputies would switch their membership to the Left Party. In the event, the WASG deputies obtained their mandates in national elections last autumn only by placing their names on a list of candidates drawn up by the former PDS.

The deputy chairmen of the Bundestag factions of both the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the SPD have used the latest conflict to challenge the right of WASG and Left Party deputies to their mandates. Wolfgang Bosbach (CDU) declared that the Left Party could no longer use a special arrangement to maintain the status of its parliamentary faction if the dispute between the Left Party and WASG could not be resolved. And Fritz Rudolf Körper (SPD) told the *Stüttgarter Nachrichten* that there was no basis for a special arrangement “because the two parties oppose one another in two states of the Federal Republic.”

In typical fashion, WASG leaders are avoiding the political issues at the heart of the dispute. At the time of its foundation, which was based on a break with the anti-welfare policies of the SPD, the WASG likewise sought to obscure the underlying political issues. Now

the two state organizations of the WASG are indignant about the anti-social policies of the Left Party, but are once again trying to avoid any broader political discussion.

The reason for this is not difficult to understand: Most of the members of the WASG state organizations in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania are former members of the PDS.

Their behavior follows a definite political logic. The rapid turn to the right by the SPD and the Left Party is a result of the political bankruptcy of their perspective. Both parties base themselves on social reformist conceptions which, under conditions of a globalised economy, lead to one industrial location being played off against another. The working class is exposed to a downward spiral of job-cuts and worsening working and living conditions.

To the extent that the WASG follows the same path, it merely continues this development ad absurdum. In a situation where broader layers of the working class are turning away from the SPD because of its openly anti-social policies, the WASG was created in a completely conscious manner as a pale new edition of the same bankrupt policy of social reformism. Its role is to bring together disenchanted and angry SPD voters and prevent them breaking with social reformism and adopting a socialist orientation.

History has no place for yet another political force which preaches the possibility of social reform. And so, just a few months after its foundation, the WASG confronts an insoluble dilemma. As was the case with the Left Party, the WASG can pose as a “left” alternative only when it does not assume government responsibility. The more parliamentary influence the WASG wins, the less able is it to prevent a break by the working class with social reformism.



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