

Germany: “Election Alternative” defends policies of Berlin state government

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5 May 2006

At a special party congress of the Election Alternative—Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) held over the weekend of April 29-30, a majority of delegates voted in favour of a resolution demanding that the Berlin regional organisation of the party withdraw its candidacy for state elections due this autumn. Should the Berlin organisation fail to comply with this demand, then the WASG national administration was expressly authorised to “examine and undertake all measures necessary to ensure that the will of the national Party Congress is carried out.”

This threat of disciplinary actions against a body of the party led to violent debates at the conference held in Ludwigshafen. Delegates complained about undemocratic structures and the dictatorial attitude adopted by the party executive committee. Largely evaded, however, was any reference to the more fundamental question of political orientation. The resolution adopted by the party against an independent candidacy by its group in Berlin involves a political decision regarding the future orientation of the party. The WASG is consciously backing the reactionary policies and attacks on social programmes carried out in the German capital during the last four years by the state and city administration comprising a coalition between the Left Party—Party of Democratic Socialism and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Behind the clamour and references in the party’s programme to a “left” or “socialist alternative,” the decision by the party congress shows the real stance of the WASG and what can be expected from the party should it acquire political power.

A brief look at the political balance sheet of the Left Party-SPD senate in Berlin is sufficient to make clear the type of policies the WASG party congress defended against its internal party critics.

All of those measures that the Left Party has explicitly condemned in its party programme have been put into effect in Berlin during the past few years—by the Left Party-PDS itself! In the summer of 2001, the Party of Democratic Socialism carried out an election campaign demanding more social justice and denouncing the criminal activities of the Berlin Banking Company (BGB). However, after winning the election and even prior to the swearing in of PDS senators, they agreed to a “risk protection law” that secured the investments of the BSB private

fund owners and shareholders with an endorsement amounting to €21.6 billion and with all of the costs to be borne by the state treasury (i.e., the ordinary citizens of Berlin).

At the same time, a drastic savings programme was adopted that involved the loss of 15,000 jobs in public services, increased working times and wage cuts. Because these measures violated Germany’s collective agreement arrangement, the senate abruptly decided to withdraw from the local employers’ association in January 2003. As a result, existing collective agreements became ineffective for all state employees. The senate then immediately implemented an extension of the working week from 40 to 42 hours for all of its officials.

State transport workers in Berlin suffered a 10 percent cut in wages and salaries, and the income for new employees was cut by a further 15 percent. According to its own data, the senate made total savings of €38 million in the city’s public services.

The medical services company Vivantes, which controls nine large hospitals in Berlin, slashed vacation and Christmas bonus payments for its workers and reduced the number of its employees from 17,000 to 13,000—leading to a clear increase in workload for the workers remaining. In his role as chairman of the supervisory board at the Berlin Charité hospital, Left Party senator Thomas Flierl supported the resolution put forward by the Charité management to impose wage cuts even greater than those imposed by Vivantes and denationalise a majority portion of the hospital administration.

Contrary to their election promises, the Left Party-SPD senate refused to reverse the partial privatisation of Berlin’s water supply undertaken by the previous senate. Instead, the net yields for the private investors (RWE and Veolia Waters) were again guaranteed, leading to rises in water rate fees of an average 25 percent. Berlin Economics Minister Harald Wolf (Left Party-PDS) has reacted to the rise in fees by assuring business he will reduce their costs—another measure that has to be borne by the population.

Additional measures include the sale of the city’s housing society (GSW) with 65,000 properties to the US investor and speculator “Cerberus,” which is notorious for using its influence on the housing market to increase rents; the abolition of free educational material in Berlin schools; a substantial

increase in charges for kindergartens; increased working times for teachers of around two lessons per week; and cuts of €75 million for the city's universities. The cuts and new burdens for the citizens of Berlin could be listed at some length.

Rarely has the deception and betrayal of the public by a government been undertaken in such an open and unashamed manner.

The fact that the WASG party congress has now justified these policies and seeks to censure its critics speaks volumes. It makes clear that the Election Alternative is anything but an alternative and will not permit the development of any alternative. The founding of the WASG by a number of trade union bureaucrats and former SPD members was a bureaucratic manoeuvre with the exclusive aim of diverting and preventing increasing opposition to welfare cuts from taking a socialist direction.

Oskar Lafontaine, who sits on the executive committees of both the WASG and the Left Party-PDS, is a former chairman of the SPD and in Ludwigshafen gave one of his notorious demagogic speeches. He loudly declaimed irresponsible policies involving welfare and pension cuts, "neo-liberal tendencies," and military interventions by the German army, and repeatedly called for the "unity of the left." The unification of the WASG and Left Party-PDS, he intoned, was of "historical importance" and could not be endangered by "left sectarians."

However, while delegates applauded enthusiastically and agreed to speed up the unification of the two parties, any serious observer was left with the question: What is to be expected from a new Left Party that upon assuming government undertakes the same politics as those pursued by the traditional parties—and in a more unscrupulous and hypocritical manner?

Lafontaine reached back into his many years as a leading member of the SPD and sought to repeat his performance 11 years previously at the Mannheim SPD Party Congress when he toppled the SPD chairman at that time, Rudolf Scharping, and took over the party leadership following a inflammatory speech against the conservative government of Helmut Kohl. Under the slogan "innovation and justice," he then went on to organise the election victory of the SPD in 1998, which formed a governing coalition with the Greens.

However, as Karl Marx noted, history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. Eight years ago, the slogan "innovation and justice" still evoked certain hopes and illusions. Today, hardly anyone believes that against a background of globalised production and the enormous power of an international finance oligarchy it is possible to defend jobs and social standards without challenging the foundations of capitalist private property relations. The necessity for a socialist perspective is becoming increasingly more evident.

This is why the plans by Lafontaine and PDS leader Gregor Gysi for a new Left Party are collapsing before the project has

gotten properly off the ground. The reflex of the WASG and Left Party is to promote the most aggressive bureaucratic elements within its ranks.

A particularly repulsive example of this species is deputy WASG chairman Uli Maurer. Maurer climbed the political ladder as long-time SPD chairman and parliamentary deputy in the state of Baden-Württemberg before switching to the WASG last year. He currently sits in the German parliament as a deputy for the party. At the recent party congress and in interviews, he openly demanded the expulsion of the Berlin regional organisation and legal steps against its "single-handed candidacy against the Left Party-PDS in Berlin." He continued by declaring that the party could not tolerate a situation where "some radical left-wing sectarians" endanger the project of a unified Left Party. Again and again, he stressed that it was insufficient to disapprove "of the Berlin procedure simply on a political basis without taking legal measures."

Maurer published a book last year together with the honorary chairman of the Left Party-PDS, Hans Modrow, entitled *Overtaking on the Left—What Can, What Does the Left Party Want?* One contribution in this anthology of essays calls upon the "German left" to finally undertake a constructive debate over the "national question." Normal political relations now exist in Germany, the author maintains, and in meetings the Left Party should have no qualms about calling out "Long live Germany" just as the French Communists proclaim "Vive la France."

The very same breed of nationalism is characteristic of trade union circles. It serves to divide workers playing off one section, nationality and work site against another. The Left Party-PDS and the WASG, which are offering their services as a last prop for the bourgeois order, are ever more clearly revealing their real reactionary programme.



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