

Germany: Election Alternative, the Socialist Alternative Group and Trotskyism

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In recent weeks, the German media has continually referred to Lucy Redler, the leading candidate for the organisation Election Alternative—Work and Social Justice (WASG) in Berlin’s state legislative elections, as a “self-proclaimed Trotskyist.” This description stands reality on its head. Redler is in fact a member of the Socialist Alternative group (SAV), an organisation that rejects all of the main principles put forward in the perspectives of the Fourth International established by Leon Trotsky.

Redler made headlines when the WASG regional committee in Berlin decided to stand its own candidates in the Berlin state elections due on September 17 against the candidates of the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The PDS is part of the current Senate (Berlin state government) in the German capital together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The separate candidacy in Berlin is endangering the planned nationwide unification of the WASG and Left Party-PDS. A majority at the WASG federal party congress, held recently in Ludwigshafen, opposed any independent candidacy in Berlin by its regional organisation, threatening to implement disciplinary action.

The WASG in Berlin justifies its independent candidacy by pointing out that in the Berlin senate the Left Party-PDS supports a policy of welfare cuts, privatisation and wage cuts, regarding the consolidation of the budget as its highest political goal. For their part, the WASG opposes all cuts in social spending and jobs.

However, the Berlin WASG and its leading candidate Lucy Redler still expressly support the planned fusion with the Left Party-PDS and at every opportunity stress that they generally support the unification of the two parties. Sascha Stanicic, SAV federal spokesman and also a member of the Berlin WASG, published an article in February, “Lafontaine and the left,” which declared that the united party was the only conceivable alternative for the foreseeable future.

“On the basis of the new rhetoric of [former SPD chairman] Oskar Lafontaine, the new party, which will probably be formed in 2007, remains the only foundation for a new party of wage earners, the unemployed and youth and could provide over a certain period a certain attraction for radicalised workers and the unemployed,” writes Stanicic. He then adds, “With the proviso that it does not join one state government after another and implement a policy of cuts.”

The last sentence forcefully sums up the opportunist motives of the SAV and Berlin WASG. Their opposition to the Berlin Senate arises from purely tactical considerations. They fear that the new party might lose its “attraction for radicalised workers and the unemployed” if the Left Party-PDS continues with the right-wing policies of the hated Senate. They fear that the real character of the new party could become evident all too quickly.

The present role of the Left Party-PDS in Berlin Senate is no accident. The PDS emerged out of the break-up of the Stalinist ruling party (SED) in former East Germany, which had always treated the working class with disdain and suppressed any expression of democratic aspirations. At the

time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PDS played a key role in the introduction of capitalism and the swallowing up of East Germany by the West. In the words of Hans Modrow, the then-Prime Minister and today’s PDS honorary chairman, the PDS saw its task as ensuring “the country’s governability and preventing chaos” and to take the “inevitable road to [German] unity.” Since then, the PDS has professed its unreserved allegiance to the free-market economy and private property. Its occasional left rhetoric serves to cut across widespread resentment while, wherever it bears government responsibility, the PDS pursues a staunch right-wing course.

Nevertheless, the SAV spreads the illusion that the unification of the PDS and WASG, under Lafontaine’s leadership, can open up a new socialist perspective. Their actions in Berlin serve to maintain this illusion. Instead of explaining the true character of the Left Party to the working class, the SAV endeavours to cover up its nakedness with a left-wing fig leaf.

Stanicic thereby exhibits his unconcealed cynicism. He openly admits that Lafontaine is only “old wine in a new bottle.” “His ideas are classical reformism, which despite their anti-capitalist rhetoric, do not go beyond the limits of capitalism, but point back to the so-called social market economy,” he writes. Lafontaine does not question “the foundations of capitalist society: Private property of the means of production, competition, free-market economy, profit maximisation, the exploitation of wage earners through the private appropriation of the value they create—and on the basis of all this, the division of society into classes and the existence of a state that represents the interests of the ruling class.”

Stanicic nevertheless supports the establishment of a party under Lafontaine’s leadership. He believes that this time-served Social Democrat has undergone a “verbal shift to the left” and praises his supposedly left-wing rhetoric in the highest tones. Strikers and protesting workers have greeted Lafontaine with “standing ovations and calls of ‘Oskar, Oskar,’ “ he writes. “This resonance alone expresses the potential for a party of wage earners and the unemployed.”

This can only be described as the politics of fraudulent misrepresentation. If protesting workers hail a left demagogue like Lafontaine, who as Stanicic admits defends the basis of capitalist society, this can only lead to bitter disappointments and defeats. A new working class party can only develop if working people break with such illusions and turn to a new perspective.

The task of today’s Marxists, the Trotskyists, is to make such a turn possible and create the best conditions for it. The SAV, however, is decidedly opposed to such a conception. It strives to encourage illusions in a party whose real role in the Berlin Senate has become unmistakably clear.

In 1938, in the founding programme of the Fourth International, Trotsky wrote: “The chief obstacle in the path of transforming the pre-revolutionary into a revolutionary state is the opportunist character of proletarian leadership: its petty bourgeois cowardice before the big

bourgeoisie and its perfidious connection with it even in its death agony.”

Trotsky drew the conclusion from the betrayal of social democracy, which had supported the First World War in 1914, and the devastating defeats of the working class in the 1920s and 1930s, due to the policy of the rising Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin, that these bureaucracies represented the biggest obstacle for the development of world revolution. He was convinced that “the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind’s culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.”

In the 1950s, this fundamental perspective was rejected by various tendencies within the Fourth International. Under the influence of the temporary stabilisation of capitalism after the Second World War, they declared that the working class no longer represented the force for social change. The coming to power by the Stalinists in Eastern Europe and China showed that “workers states” could be created without a conscious revolutionary movement of the working class. The Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies would fulfil this role. The only task left for the Marxists would be to put pressure on these bureaucracies from the left.

The most important representative of these tendencies was Michel Pablo, who led the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (IS) after the 1953 split in the Fourth International. He was opposed by the International Committee of the Fourth International (IC), which energetically defended the Trotskyist perspective against the opportunism of the Pabloites and continues to do so today.

Another revisionist group opposed to the IC was formed in Britain around Ted Grant. In 1953, Grant and his co-thinkers left the British section of the Fourth International and in 1957 joined the Pabloite IS. In 1964, Grant broke with the IS and established the *Militant* newspaper. In the following three decades, the Militant Tendency worked within the Labour Party, claiming this reformist party could be placed under pressure to carry out the socialist transformation of society.

The growing witch-hunt by the Labour leadership led the Militant Tendency to finally leave the Labour Party in 1993 but it never drew any political lessons from the failure of its perspective and the decades of experience of the working class with the Labour Party. Instead, it strives today to develop a new reformist party in the form of the Socialist Party, which is composed of disenchanted supporters of the Labour Party and the Communist Party, trade union bureaucrats and various radical groups.

The SAV was founded in 1973 in Germany based upon the model of the British Militant Tendency by three members of the SPD youth organisation, the *Jusos* (Young Socialists). It is part of the Committee for a Workers International established by the Militant group. For a long time, it also worked within social democracy and tried unsuccessfully to pressure it to the left. Only after the experiences of the Militant Tendency within the Labour Party did the SAV abandon working in the SPD in the mid-1990s. However, it retained its fundamental orientation to the reformist bureaucracies.

Today, the SAV rejects the building of a Marxist party for the working class with the argument that such a venture is impossible, as long as the majority of workers have illusions that capitalism can be reformed. While it admits that the right-wing nature of the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies means they are rapidly losing their influence, it vehemently refuses to fill the vacuum that has resulted on the left with a socialist perspective.

According to the SAV, workers must first go through a centrist stage, between reform and revolution, before they can be brought to a revolutionary perspective. Any attempt to jump over this stage leads inevitably to defeats and isolation, it claims. The task of Marxists, the SAV declares, is to create as broad an alliance as possible of left-wing tendencies in which one can agitate for socialist policies in the long term.

This is also the political basis for the work of the SAV within the WASG, which was brought into being by former SPD members and union

officials in west Germany to prevent workers from breaking with social reformist conceptions. From the outset, it represented a deliberate manoeuvre to prevent the emergence of an uncontrolled mass movement to the left of the SPD. But instead of warning the working class about this political trap, the SAV in the WASG cooperates with it and provides a left cover.

The SAV thus plays a key role in binding the working class to the old labour bureaucracies and preventing them from developing an independent political perspective. The more the SPD loses influence among working people, the more dependent the ruling elite is on such groups to defend its bourgeois order. This is the reason for the massive media interest in the supposed “Trotskyist” Lucy Redler, who was the subject of even more interviews than Lafontaine at the Ludwigsburg WASG party congress.

This is an international phenomenon. The social democratic and Stalinist parties that represented the most important pillars of bourgeois order inside the workers’ movement in the post-war period have been discredited throughout Europe by their harsh attacks on the working and living conditions of the general population. The ruling elite is therefore increasingly dependent on the support of other left-wing forces.

In France, the election of Lionel Jospin as Prime Minister in 1997 placed a man at the head of government who had spent the majority of his life as a member of the OCI (Organisation communiste internationaliste). After the Jospin government carried out large-scale attacks on the working class and was voted out in 2002, another pseudo-Trotskyist grouping, the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire) is now hoping to revive the same kind of left coalition.

In Italy, Fausto Bertinotti, the chairman of Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), has just been elected to the post of parliamentary speaker. Bertinotti is thereby undertaking the key task in securing stable majorities for the government of Romano Prodi, which has been entrusted with the confidence of big sections of the Italian and European bourgeoisie and is committed to a programme of strict budget consolidation. For many years, Communist Refoundation was held up as a role model of the kind of left-wing party aspired to by the Militant Tendency in Britain and the SAV in Germany.

In light of these international experiences, there can be no doubt where the political course of the WASG and SAV leads. It can only open up the path to new betrayals and defeats.



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