

Germany: Election Alternative prepares for merger with Left Party

An exemplary case of political opportunism

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Two hundred seventy delegates of the organisation Election Alternative—Labour and Social Justice (WASG) met in the remote town of Geseke in western Germany last weekend for a national congress. Many of the remarks at the congress made verbose references to “left alternatives,” “democratic socialism,” and “expropriation of the key industries and banks,” and there was general talk of the “need for a more humane society.”

The use of such flowery words accompanied by occasional quotes from Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, however, cannot disguise the fact that the WASG undertook a further lurch to the right at its conference. This was made unmistakably clear from the resolutions passed at the congress.

At the heart of the congress was the decision to proceed with the merger of the WASG with the Left Party-PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formerly the Stalinist SED, which governed in the former GDR) planned for next summer. The WASG executive committee was expressly delegated to stick “to the decided timetable” for the merge of the organisations. An amendment to the WASG’s statutes was decided by a large majority, making possible the transformation of the WASG into a registered association. According to German law, this is the “formal prerequisite” for merging of the WASG with the Left Party-PDS, which has a much larger membership.

Following sharp criticism at the congress of the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party coalition government in Berlin by many WASG members and some delegates, the executive committee felt obliged to respond with the following formulation: “At the same time we reject demands from our own ranks which demand that the creation of the new party be made dependent on a withdrawal by the Left Party-PDS from the coalition [governing in Berlin]. There is no politically meaningful alternative to a unification of the left in June 2007.”

To head off protests of the policies of the coalition in Berlin, the congress adopted an appeal calling upon the Left Party-PDS in Berlin to refuse to sign the recently completed austerity coalition agreement and demanding improvements on some issues. Predictably, the criticism of the coalition agreement was limited to a small number of points.

Just a few hours later, however, the Left Party-PDS delivered its own dismissive answer to the appeal made by the WASG. At its own state congress in Berlin, held at the same time as the WASG meeting, Left Party delegates voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of the coalition contract. As this decision was communicated to the WASG congress, delegates reacted with subdued silence and some isolated whistling.

The fear that the anti-social policies of the Berlin government could discredit the project of a unified Left Party, before it even properly got off the ground, haunted the WASG conference in Geseke. A succession of speakers dissociated themselves from specific policies implemented in Berlin and denounced the welfare cuts introduced by the SPD-Left Party senate in the German capital as “completely unacceptable.”

However, facts are facts.

The resolution passed at the WASG congress to finalise its merger with the Left Party-PDS has its own inexorable logic. It means that the WASG—regardless of any verbal criticism—shares full responsibility and has to be held to account for the policies carried out in Berlin. It also makes clear that, when called upon to take up political responsibility, the WASG will carry out the same policies now being implemented by its colleagues in Berlin.

“In for a penny, in for a pound!” is a popular saying. In future, when WASG members attempt to criticise existing social and political conditions, they must be called to account for the social cuts implemented by the Berlin senate. It is their party that is responsible for the far-reaching attacks on the living standards of the working population—exceeding in terms of ruthlessness and political irresponsibility the measures implemented by many other conservative state governments in Germany.

Behind the fake debates over the necessity of expropriating large-scale industry and the banks, WASG delegates were in fact participating in the process of merger with a party that, upon taking power in Berlin in 2001, made as its first priority the bailing out of the bankrupt Berliner Bankgesellschaft. To this end, the senate took out a loan of €21.6 billion to secure the

shares and profits of investors in the Berlin bank. The burden of debt raised to secure the lucrative profits of a small elite was then placed entirely on the backs of the city's citizens.

This initial measure by the Berlin senate was then followed by one blow after another: the destruction of 15,000 public service jobs with a pledge to dismantle a further 18,000 by 2012; the withdrawal of the senate from the local employers' association in order to circumvent existing contract agreements and lower salaries in the city by around 10 percent; the elimination of 3,000 jobs and wage cuts of up to 10 percent for public transport workers; extensive job and wage cuts in the city's hospitals; the introduction of 34,000 €1-per-hour jobs to replace full-time employees; substantial increases in fees for nursery schools; the reduction of teaching staff and the transfer of school material costs to parents; cuts of around €75 million in subsidies to the city's three universities; the sales of communally owned housing to private investors; and so on. This is a list of just some of the more important measures and cuts imposed by the "new Left Party-PDS" with which the WASG seeks to unite.

The political balance sheet of the Berlin senate was just as catastrophic. Some WASG delegates tried to describe the unified Left Party "as a shift of social relations towards the left," but in fact just the opposite is the case. The austerity policies of the Berlin senate, imposed under the guise of "left-wing" initiatives, have in fact created conditions whereby right-wing populists can exploit social problems for their own benefit and with the use of racist demagoguery.

Another decision of the congress in Geseke served to emphasise the right-wing and undemocratic character of the WASG. Delegates defended the actions of the party executive directed against its Berlin regional organisation, which decided in early summer to stand its own candidates against the Left Party-PDS in the recent Berlin senate elections. First of all, the national executive sought to prohibit its Berlin organisation from standing independent candidates. But when the Berlin branch defied the ban, the national executive declared that the Berlin organisations had been suspended and appointed its own "authorised delegate" to intervene in Berlin. The regional organisation then had to resort to legal action to implement its democratic rights and defend its right to stand candidates.

The majority of the delegates in Geseke supported the stance taken by the executive committee, raising the question: How will such a party treat voters and the population at large when it is prepared to resort to such undemocratic methods against its own members?

In fact, the planned merger amounts to nothing more than the union between a section of the trade union bureaucracy from west Germany with the remnants of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the east of the country—the same bureaucracy that for decades stifled any independent movement of the East German working class. Long-time trade union bureaucrats, such as WASG founding member Klaus Ernst, have little to learn from the

Stalinists in the PDS when it comes to imposing bureaucratic dictatorial measures.

Political groupings such as the SAV (affiliated to the Militant organisation) and Linksruck (with affiliations to the Socialist Workers Party in Great Britain), which call themselves socialist and even Trotskyist, have played a particularly noxious role in this development. They seek to present the bureaucratic manoeuvre at the heart of project for a united Left Party-PDS as some sort of progressive development and as a political renewal of the workers' movement.

In Berlin, SAV members in the WASG stood their own candidates in the recent senate election. Their avowed goal was to force the Left Party-PDS to withdraw from its coalition with the SPD in order to prevent the premature discrediting and undermining of the "Left Party-PDS project." Its efforts proved fruitless, however.

Once again at the Geseke congress, the SAV attempted to drape the bureaucratic manoeuvres with some sort of socialist credentials. Delegates, however, were not even prepared to accept the vague demand for "democratic socialism" as an aim for the new party.

At the same time, however, delegates voted Berlin SAV member Lucy Redler into the WASG executive to help it prepare to merge with the very same party it criticised so vehemently during the course of the Berlin senate election campaign.

There are important lessons to be drawn from this utterly unserious political manoeuvre. For many years, social democracy in the west of the country and the Stalinist bureaucracy in the east constituted important props for the bourgeois state. Now, as the disintegration and collapse of the reformist bureaucracies proceeds apace, the unified Left Party-PDS has been established to maintain as long as possible the illusion that capitalism is capable of being reformed.

The current social crisis, however, cannot be overcome within the framework of existing capitalist relations. What is necessary is a political movement of the working class, which fights for the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis, thoroughly independent of the SPD, the Left Party-PDS and the trade unions. This requires the building of an independent socialist party that consistently opposes all social reformist and Stalinist conceptions.



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