

Germany: Left Party-PDS and Election Alternative agree on a common reformist program

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On December 10 the executive committees of the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism and the Election Alternative—Labour and Social Justice (WASG) agreed to programmatic guidelines for the planned merger of the two organisations in the middle of next year. Under discussion was not a finished program for the new party, which is to be known simply as the Left Party, but rather programmatic points, which give some indication of the organization's future political orientation.

For a reader, the most positive aspect of the new program is its brevity. One is no longer required, as with previous draft programs, to wade through lengthy diatribes about the evils of 'neo-liberal' capitalism. The new draft comprises just eleven pages, which outline the main points. In fact, these points have already been included in previous statements of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, heir to the former East German ruling Stalinist party), primarily aimed at reassuring Germany's ruling elite that the party was prepared to support the existing system.

The new draft will not cause members of the ruling elite to lose any sleep either. The program indicates that the new party has no intention of implementing serious radical measures. All of the points raised—proclamations of adherence to democracy, freedom, peace, social justice, and also socialism, peppered with hopes for the eventual "overcoming of capitalism" and demands for the re-introduction of a wealth tax and the abolition of European defence projects—have regularly cropped up in every PDS program, without having any practical consequences.

The references in the draft to "overcoming" this or that social obstacle are intended to convince the existing political and business elite that the opposition embodied in the Left Party-PDS is of a thoroughly tame character. The party speaks of "overcoming" social division, "overcoming" property and political relations, "overcoming" cultural divisions, "overcoming" NATO and, as previously mentioned, capitalism—but refrains from making any concrete proposals.

Two aspects of the program deserve closer attention.

First, the gap between the demands raised and political

reality, the contradiction between words and deeds, which characterised the former PDS, has never been so great as it is at present.

The program emphasises society's responsibility "for sufficiently affordable housing, for adequate public local and regional transport, for universally accessible, free education" and declares that "the elected representatives of the left" should seek to implement such measures. It neglects to mention that the Left Party-PDS has just agreed to renew its coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the federal capital of Berlin and thus continue a course of anti-social policies without equal in all of Germany.

The SPD/Left Party-PDS coalition has already carried out job destruction and cut public employees' wages and social programs in Berlin. It is also responsible for increasing fees for public services and education and cuts at the city's three universities.

One of the measures taken by the outgoing Berlin senate was the sell-off of the public housing corporation, GSW, which controlled 65,000 apartments. The apartments were sold to a consortium led by US-based Cerberus and Goldman Sachs's Whitehall Fund for two billion euros.

These apartments can now be rented or sold at much higher prices. One of the first acts of the new incoming Senate was to further eat away at the Berlin housing stock by selling off 877 homes in the suburb of Hellersdorf to two Dutch investors.

The new "left" coalition agreement excluded sales of local homes and apartments, but left a loophole allowing such sales when the financial viability of a housing association is threatened. Bearing in mind the dubious state of the finances of a number of the associations in Berlin, further sales of housing stock can be anticipated.

Completely ignoring its record in office, Page 6 of the Left Party draft program reads, "Therefore we defend public services and welfare and favour their expansion. We want to prevent the sales of public property in the form of housing and maintenance service enterprises."

Another example of Left Party-PDS hypocrisy concerns education. The SPD/Left-Party-PDS senate introduced the first

significant school fees in Berlin. Obligated to pay 100 euros a year for school materials, poorer families and those with several children are forced to send their children to school with either no or very limited materials.

At the same time, Berlin teachers complain of serious personnel shortages. The new senate is confronted with declarations from three Berlin schools complaining of an excessive pupil-teacher ratio.

One gets an impression of the extremely difficult conditions by reading the interview that appeared December 14 in the *Junge Welt* newspaper with Berlin teacher Marianne Voelske. In essence, she and other teachers are uttering a collective sigh of despair at the prospect of a further five years of the SPD/Left Party-PDS coalition.

She explains, "In December colleagues declared in an open letter to the [Berlin] senate that they are physically and psychologically exhausted and unable to implement the continuous stream of new reforms."

She mentions the condition of a colleague, who has worked as a teacher for 30 years. "After six or seven hours she goes home 'drained' and 'exhausted' and needs several hours of regeneration until she is able to prepare for the next day. She now always shifts marking exams to the weekend." None of the teaching staff have any hope that the senate will do anything positive, and "expectations are simply rock bottom."

Nevertheless, Page 8 of the Left Party-PDS draft program declares, "We want to ensure . . . a comprehensive choice of all day education." And further down, "Education for us is a public right, which because of its social significance should be accessible for all free of charge."

The second important aspect of the draft program is that it provides a glimpse into the future, and the possible participation by the Left Party-PDS in a national government. In this respect the signals to the ruling class are unmistakable.

The point is explicitly expressed in one paragraph, "Decisive for the implementation of a change of course is politics at national level. Here lies the authority which is necessary; this is where most of the important decisions are made."

In this respect the new program creates the necessary conditions for the Left Party-PDS to be accepted by the ruling class.

Any changes to property or ownership relations have never been posed by the PDS in a revolutionary sense, but in the new program the Left Party restricts itself entirely to what is possible on a strict constitutional basis.

On the other hand, the program unceasingly emphasises the inevitability of the free-market economy: "the Left sees in the existing different forms of property the basis for an efficient and democratic economy," or, "Profit-oriented business practice is important for innovation and economic efficiency."

With regard to the hitherto vigorously disputed question of the Left Party's participation in government there will no longer be any barriers. The new party will "participate in

governments to retain public welfare against privatisation strategies, to ensure no deterioration of public services for citizens through personnel reduction and to prevent cuts in social services." In fact the Left Party through its political practice has repeatedly abused all of these pledges.

However, to be recognized at the national level in Germany, a party must adopt a respectable and acceptable foreign policy. Any party not prepared to recognise clearly and identify with German interests and German military power is regarded as unsuitable for the highest government offices. This has been an area of controversy in the PDS-Left Party. At its Münster congress in 2000, for example, PDS delegates voted down the party chairman Lothar Bisky, who argued in favour of military interventions by the United Nations in line with Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

The new program now states that the party "basically" rejects such deployments. The media and a few members of an internal party opposition known as the "anti-capitalist left" have identified this statement as a key declaration.

This formulation, taken together with a comment recently made by Bisky after the official presentation of the new program, in fact, opens the way for agreement on the part of the Left Party to such foreign military deployments. In his comment, Bisky declared that both the PDS and the Election Alternative "did not reject in principle international missions by the German army . . . if people are being murdered, as they are in the Sudan." Bisky continued, in such a case "a deployment of the German army under the leadership of the UN must be discussed."

Bisky has made his position very clear. In the late 1990s the Green Party evoked the Nazi mass murder of the Jews as justification for the German army going to war in the Balkans. Now Bisky states that Left Party opposition to international missions by the German army can be ditched "if people are being murdered." Under conditions where "people are being murdered" in crisis regions around the globe, Bisky's comment serves not only to legitimize all existing German army missions—e.g., in Afghanistan, Sudan or Lebanon—but also gives the German government a green light with regard to additional military interventions.



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