

Germany: How “Socialist Alternative” blocks the building of an independent socialist movement

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17 January 2007

The SAV (Socialist Alternative) group, the German affiliate of Peter Taaffe’s Socialist Party in Britain, regards as its main task the prevention of an independent movement of the working class. This was made clear at its recent national conference to determine its attitude to the Left Party, which will be formed in 2007 from a merger of the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the so-called “Election Alternative—Jobs and Social Justice” (WASG).

The SAV was thrust into the media spotlight last year when it supported the independent candidacy of the WASG against the Left Party-PDS in elections to the Berlin Senate (city legislature)—while simultaneously arguing for the merger of the two organisations at a federal level. SAV member Lucy Redler then stood as the WASG lead candidate in the Berlin election.

The decision to stand an independent candidate in the Berlin election met with fierce opposition from the WASG federal leadership, which was opposed to the Berlin regional organisation standing its own candidates. The arbitrary dismissal of the WASG Berlin region executive by the federal party leadership was only reversed following a court order, making it possible for the former group to participate in the Berlin election.

Behind the independent election campaign of the Berlin WASG was the fact that the Left Party-PDS had been a longstanding coalition partner in the Berlin Senate with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Over the past five years, the policies carried out by the Senate had clearly revealed that, behind its left-sounding words, the Left Party-PDS pursued extremely right-wing policies. For the WASG to present itself as a left-wing alternative in Berlin while campaigning for the re-election of the Left Party-PDS would have rung completely hollow.

For the same reasons, the SAV regarded Left Party-PDS participation in the Berlin parliament as an impediment to the project of forming a united Left Party at the federal level.

How could the voters be fooled into thinking that such a party represents their interests, when it does the exact opposite each day in Berlin? The purpose of the WASG’s independent candidacy in Berlin was to force the Left Party-PDS out of the existing coalition with the SPD in order to secure the planned merger at the federal level.

This plan, however, did not succeed. Despite a substantial loss in votes in the Senate election last autumn, the Left Party-PDS continues to form the Berlin city government together with the SPD and has stepped up its attacks on the working and living conditions of ordinary Berliners.

The reaction of the SAV has been one of unparalleled political confusion. In the east of Germany, it opposes the merger and seeks, together with the WASG, to develop a regional alternative to the Left Party-PDS, because the latter is associated in the region and in Berlin “with participation in welfare cuts and privatisation.” In the west of Germany, on the other hand, it is calling for a vote against merger, but says it would still work within the merged party, since the new party is, according to the SAV, “despite everything, a part of the left and the workers’ movement” and is seen as “an opposition force.”

Although the SAV is conscious of the right-wing character of the Left Party-PDS, it wants to politically subordinate workers in the west of Germany to this party. In the east, where the right-wing character of the Left Party-PDS is already clear to all, the same goal is to be achieved by building an illusory alternative in the form of a regional WASG. Instead of explaining to workers the true character of the Left Party-PDS and the WASG, Peter Taaffe’s German supporters in the SAV are promoting unfounded illusions in these parties in order to prevent the working class from developing an organisation to represent its independent interests.

The report of the SAV national conference expressly states that the delegates clearly rejected “the idea that another left-wing...party or similar organisation be formed as a reaction

to the expected merger of the WASG and Left Party-PDS,” because the social basis for this does not presently exist. Instead, the SAV aims to build a network of “left-wing and oppositional forces,” “independently of whether it is active inside or outside the future merged party.” In this way, it seeks to bind to the Left Party those forces that are not prepared to collaborate inside it or those that have already turned away from it in disappointment.

Such a mechanism has already been created within the WASG with the active participation of the SAV in the form of the Network of the Left Opposition (NLO). In the meantime, a majority within this network has come to the conclusion that eventually a new political force must be built as an alternative to the Left Party.

Although such a call is meant primarily as a threat to the WASG leadership, it goes too far for the SAV. The call for an alternative became the cause for fierce disputes within the NLO. In an open letter dated December 19, the SAV federal leadership announced that such decisions meant the SAV “could no longer collaborate in the NLO.”

The SAV criticised the NLO statement that it wants to build a political alternative “to every political party that privatises public property, imposes welfare cuts and lowers wages.” For the SAV, present conditions “do not really promise success” in building such an “alternative force” to the merged Left Party.

Its arguments reveal the full extent of the cynicism and duplicity of this organisation. “We assume that the merged party must first be discredited nationwide before the social basis for the formation of a new party or an ‘alternative force’ develops,” the SAV writes. “This will happen if the present leadership prevails in the future, which is to be assumed.”

The SAV is assuming that a united Left Party will in future continue a policy of sharp attacks on the living and working conditions of ordinary people. But instead of warning against this, speaking the truth and fighting to build a revolutionary alternative, it is encouraging new illusions in these right-wing forces, by claiming that the Left Party is the “only serious left-wing force on a party-political level” and that “activists” will turn towards it.

It could not be clearer that the SAV is nothing more than a left fig leaf for the right-wing policies of the Left Party.

The SAV national conference also provided a suitable theoretical foundation for this opportunist practice. Thus, SAV executive committee member Lucy Redler explained, Marxists today have the dual task of developing both a Marxist organisation and contributing to the reconstruction of the workers’ movement in the broader sense. She herself fulfils this dual role at present by publicly criticising the right-wing course of the Left Party-PDS and WASG while

simultaneously remaining a member of the WASG national leadership, in order to provide the merged party with a left cover.

Such a distinction between the construction of a Marxist organisation and the building of the workers’ movement is symptomatic for petty-bourgeois organisations like the SAV. By the workers’ movement “in the broader sense” they understand the trade unions—the reactionary, corrupt, class-collaborationist bureaucratic apparatus. They could never conceive that the workers’ movement can only be developed by the building of an independent Marxist party. It was precisely in this manner in Germany that one of the most powerful workers’ movements of the world was built in the second half of the nineteenth century—through the building of the SPD, which at that time still represented a Marxist programme.

The most important precondition for the reconstruction of a revolutionary workers’ movement is a conscious break with the old reformist organisations and the theoretical conceptions of social reformism. The SAV, however, is organically hostile to such a break. It desperately seeks to continue to subordinate working people to the old bureaucracies from which they are finally turning away after years of disappointments.

The SAV is playing the same role in Germany as middle-class radical organisations such as the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire in France or Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. Everywhere in Europe, the old workers’ organisations are largely discredited by their right-wing policies, and broad masses of people are looking for a political alternative. To defend its social system, the bourgeoisie is therefore increasingly dependent on such petty-bourgeois “left” forces, whose central task is to prevent the working class from breaking with social reformism and turning to a socialist perspective.



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