

Germany's Left Party holds student congress to promote reformist politics

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In mid-January, the Left Party-PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) and the Election Alternative (WASG) organized a national congress of students in Frankfurt/Main under the slogan "Get Up, Stand Up."

Following extensive preparations over many weeks and considerable financial expenditure, the organisers expressed their disappointment over the relatively small turnout. Around 400 attended the congress, and those participating came almost exclusively from the close periphery of the Left Party-PDS and the Election Alternative. The congress took the form of several plenary meetings and two dozen workshops and forums.

Despite the modest size of the meeting, it is necessary to take a closer look at this attempt to establish a "left university federation." The last few years have witnessed a steady decline in political activity in German universities. One of the last groupings to attract some interest was the anti-globalisation movement Attac. However, this group's close organizational and political links to Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens led to rapid disillusionment during the period of the SPD-Green coalition government (1998-2005), which carried out a series of right-wing anti-social policies.

The declining influence of the established parties at the universities stands in reverse relation to the growth of social problems, which are ever more directly and concretely impacting on the lives of students. Students confront manifold problems, such as the decline of facilities at universities, the introduction of study fees, the subordination of university courses to the immediate interests of big business, and, more generally, declining working class living standards, as a result of which many students are forced to take low-wage jobs to finance their studies.

Together with such social problems, students confront the consequences of US policy in the Middle East, its threats against Iran and the increasing danger of war—all issues which cannot be resolved under existing social conditions and which have led to growing discontent with Germany's established parties.

The current initiative by the Left Party-PDS and Election Alternative is in reaction to this situation. These organisations see the demonstrations held by students last summer in the states of Hessen and North-Rhine/Westphalia against the introduction of study fees as the beginning of a radicalisation at the universities. They aim to establish a university federation which strikes "left" poses and seeks to capture the leadership of such a radicalisation, while defending a program that remains entirely within the framework of the existing capitalist system. Such a perspective would transform student opposition into harmless protest and impede any turn towards a genuine socialist perspective.

In this respect, the Left Party-PDS is merely repeating at the universities the role it has carried out in East Germany on a daily basis since the reunification of Germany in 1990. The honorary chairman of the party, Hans Modrow, often stressed in the past that the most important role of the PDS (the successor organisation to the Stalinist ruling party of the former East Germany) was to "secure peace and order" in the crucial months of the reunification process.

Strikes and other forms of worker actions aimed at defending jobs and East German industries from the rationalisation policies of West German companies were systemically sabotaged by Modrow, while PDS Economics Minister Christa Luft was instrumental in setting up the trust that later supervised the closure of many East German factories.

Since then, the PDS has assumed power in many cities and municipalities of East Germany, and competes with established West German parties such as the SPD and the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) in implementing austerity programs and social cuts at the expense of the working population. In its public propaganda, the PDS warns of the effects of privatisation in the public service, but in those states where it shares power, the Left Party-PDS has implemented the most draconian and extensive privatisation measures.

This is most clearly the case in the German capital, where the Left Party has played a vital role in the state Senate, together with the SPD, for more than five years, carrying out social cuts that go way beyond those implemented in many areas governed by CDU councils.

Now the Left Party is trying to develop a "left force" for stability in the universities.

In Frankfurt, this occasionally assumed a grotesque form. The main speaker at the central opening meeting was former SPD Economics Minister Oskar Lafontaine. He outdid himself in the use of radical terminology as he complained about the exclusion and impoverishment of broad layers of society, and launched an assault on what he termed the "hegemony of neo-liberalism." He justified political strikes and demanded a general strike against the recent measure by the German government raising the retirement age.

The organizers had evidently hoped that the predominantly young audience was unfamiliar with the career of this "critic of the system." In fact, Lafontaine has held senior public offices for the past forty years.

As a youthful mayor in the state of Saarland, Lafontaine introduced so-called "social labour"—a forced labour scheme for those dependent on social relief. Then, as prime minister of Saarland, he was instrumental, in collaboration with the trade unions, in dismantling the region's coal and steel industry, resulting in the destruction of 40,000 jobs.

As chairman of the SPD at the end of the 1990s, Lafontaine played a major role in transforming the SPD into an uncompromising political agent of big business interests. He was an architect of the 1998 SPD-Green Party coalition, and although today he calls for a general strike, he resigned his post as finance minister in 1999 after criticism from business lobbies, leaving Gerhard Schröder in charge of the party and government.

Lafontaine is quite aware that the smashing up of the welfare state leads to popular opposition, and he is seeking in alliance with the PDS to establish a bureaucratic safety net and prevent the development of an independent political movement with a genuinely socialist orientation.

The role of Lafontaine and the politics of the Frankfurt meeting as a whole were most clearly revealed in his remark that the trade unions were the "most important ally" of social opposition.

If Lafontaine had taken the trouble to speak during the break with staff in the refectory or the university administration he would have learned something about the real role of the trade unions. During the past two years, the public service union Verdi has implemented a new contract involving drastic wage cuts, longer work hours and attacks on working conditions.

Germany's biggest industrial union, IG Metall, is in the process of introducing a similar contract for its members—in the face of broad opposition. In the case of the auto concern Volkswagen, shop stewards agreed last year to an increase in work hours without an increase in pay for German workers on the basis of promises from management that production of a major model would be transferred from Belgium to VW factories in Germany. As a result, at least 3,200 jobs have been cut at the VW factory in Brussels. The unions and work councils played a key role in sabotaging the recent seven-week strike and occupation undertaken by Volkswagen workers in Brussels.

Instead of being forced to line up behind the corporatist policies of the German unions, university students must make direct contact with those employed in the factories and offices, with the aim of developing a political movement that functions entirely independently of the bureaucratic apparatuses of the unions, the SPD and the Left Party-PDS.

At the Frankfurt conference, Lafontaine went on the defensive when a supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke of these issues. She pointed out that wherever it had assumed positions of responsibility, the Left Party-PDS had carried out policies which were virtually indistinguishable from those implemented by mainstream bourgeois parties.

Lafontaine sought to play down the calamitous record of the SPD-Left Party Senate in Berlin, referring to “incorrect decisions in Berlin,” only to stress a moment later that such measures were, after all, necessary in order to preserve “unity.”

Lafontaine and the other speakers at the congress advanced political perspectives that have nothing in common with socialism, but instead consist of proposals to reform capitalism. Exemplary in this respect was the former professor from Berlin Elmar Altvater, who called for participation by the left in the decision-making bodies of the G-8 summit of world leaders.

Altvater, who is often described as an expert on globalisation, is a former member of the Greens and a sympathizer of the Attacmovement. In a paper devoted to such issues as the dominance of private financial companies and international investor funds and the struggle for energy reserves, he raised the question: “Can such developments still be resolved within the framework of the G-8? Doesn't one need a much broader committee?”

In answering his own question, he stressed that the left “could not simply say ‘no’ to the G-8,” but had to directly participate in a process whereby the G-8 developed into a kind of capitalist world government.

Altvater sees the task of the “left” as giving advice to bourgeois politicians on how to reform and stabilise global capitalism. He categorically excludes a socialist alternative and has stated, “The socialism of the twentieth century failed in 1989.”

He was challenged by a speaker who declared that the dissolution of the Soviet Union fully confirmed the analysis of the Trotskyist movement, which had made clear that it was Stalinism, not socialism, that had failed. New material from previously inaccessible archives demonstrated the extent to which a Marxist Left Opposition had opposed Stalinism. Altvater reacted in an aggressive fashion and denounced the speaker in a profane manner.

Such tirades against Trotsky and a revolutionary socialist perspective vividly recall a period forty years ago when the Stalinists set about establishing their own university federation, which had the express purpose of denouncing and suppressing Trotskyists and Trotskyism.

The radicalisation of German students in the early and middle 1960s led to the expulsion of the German Socialist Student federation (SDS) from the SPD. The SDS then quickly attracted a broad range of left-wing organisations to its ranks.

Germany at the time was governed by a grand coalition and extra-parliamentary activities increased in opposition to such measures as rearmament, the government's Emergency Laws and Germany's restrictive education system, in which many professors with links to the Nazis were still active.

In response to this radicalisation, the Stalinist Communist Party (DKP) was founded in 1968, together with its student organization, the Marxist Student Federation (MSB), which was aligned with the state apparatus of East Germany and repeatedly resorted to Stalinist methods of censorship and thuggery to suppress any serious debate on a socialist perspective.

Today, the Stalinists no longer possess a powerful state apparatus and the old lies which sought to equate socialism with the crimes of Stalinism have been discredited.

There was considerable interest at the congress for the literature table set up by members of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) and the WSWs. Lively discussions took place at the table in breaks between the congress proceedings in response to a leaflet produced and distributed by the PSG. Headlined “War, Social Cuts and the Role of the Left Party-PDS,” the leaflet declared,

“We decisively reject this cowardly adaptation to the Left Party. One of the most important conditions for a successful struggle against war and welfare cuts is a sober look at reality and calling things by their real names. With respect to the Left Party, this means a relentless campaign to unmask its anti-social and reactionary politics . . . The Socialist Equality Party (PSG) stands for the construction of a political movement that is completely independent of the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions and fights for a reorganization of society on a socialist basis.”



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