

Germany: Left Party and Election Alternative seal their merger

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In the 2005 elections to the Bundestag (federal parliament), former Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman Oskar Lafontaine campaigned for the Election Alternative (WASG) by employing a quotation from Victor Hugo: “There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.” The recent dual congresses of the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism and WASG might have been held under the slogan: “Nothing is as uninspiring as the manoeuvre that is being organised here.” Two bureaucratic apparatuses were uniting in order to breathe life into a third—the SPD.

By a large majority, the congress delegates meeting in Dortmund agreed to the merger of the two parties into a new organisation, to be called Die Linke (The Left). While 96.9 percent of Left Party-PDS delegates supported the merger, just 88 percent of their counterparts in the WASG supported it.

The party leaderships went to extreme lengths to ensure this end result. They agreed to establish “political key points,” a sort of founding programme for the new organisation, simultaneously by both parties. If one party decided upon a change, this had also to be approved by the other party, leading to quite bizarre debates.

As soon as the politics of Berlin city government came into discussion, the dual party congresses faced a dilemma. The delegates had to attempt to reconcile what the new party was claiming to be with the experience of what it has already carried out in practice in Berlin. They had to find formulas, that while sounding left-wing, made sure that the organisation could carry out right-wing policies.

Ever since the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism entered a collation administration with the SPD in the Berlin city government, it has carried out policies that the delegates (and particularly the WASG) usually denounced in demagogic speeches. These included the redistribution of social wealth from those at the bottom to those at the top, job and wage cuts in the public sector, raising the cost of the social infrastructure such as schools and child care, and selling off public property to private investors.

If a single delegate had seriously addressed the “political key points,” the Berlin regional organisation of the Left Party-PDS would have had to be ejected from the congress immediately. No one, of course, demanded this. Rather, every effort was

made to reduce formulations to the smallest common denominator.

For example, the original draft supported government participation by the new party, if it “strives” to pursue the goal “not to worsen public services through slashing jobs and cutting social services.” But this talk of “striving” provides a ready justification for the actions of the Berlin Left Party, which constantly stresses that it has only the best of intentions, but that Berlin’s financial situation unfortunately makes any other policy impossible.

The WASG congress delegates wanted to replace this passage with the following formulation: “Die Linke will only enter coalitions with other parties in accordance with its constitution. Public property may not be privatised. Cuts in public sector personnel must be stopped, and likewise cuts in social spending are to be prevented.”

The Left Party rejected this, whereupon some WASG members wanted to force a line-by-line vote. Hardly had the WASG congress accepted the first sentence, with some dissenting votes, when an electoral committee speaker announced, “We can vote on many things here, but the Left Party has already voted, and they have only accepted the first sentence.”

As was to be expected, the delegates finally agreed on a rather flexible formula. “Public property may not be privatised” was replaced with “public provisions may not be privatised.” The precise difference will probably be explained to Berliners when a state-run enterprise, public housing company or such like is sold off to an investor.

All the other passages of the programme are similarly vague. A deep gulf exists between the document’s proclaimed goals and its practical conclusions, which does not worry anybody in the WASG and the Left Party. The programme states that democratic socialism will “overcome” capitalism, and “push back” neo-liberalism, while announcing that profit-oriented entrepreneurialism can work for the benefit of all.

The haggling over words, commas and hyphens that marked the dual party congress expresses the essential emptiness of the new party. Die Linke does not offer an alternative to the politics of the establishment parties. Rather, it fulfils an urgent need of the ruling elite: It is the attempt to fill the vacuum left

by the rightward development of the SPD.

In the seven years in which the SPD was in a government coalition with the Green Party, many SPD members and voters angrily turned their backs on the party. In entering the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats, the SPD has also abandoned the last vestiges of left-wing politics. This has left behind a vacuum that could lead to a radicalisation and development of a revolutionary socialist opposition. This is what Die Linke is trying to prevent at any price. It strives to be a cushion for the ruling elite with which to smother the increasing opposition within the population while taking on government responsibility. It represents the last gasp of bourgeois rule.

The WASG was created in 2004 by time-served social democrats and union bureaucrats as a reaction to the growing opposition to the right-wing policies of the SPD-Green government. The organisation's leader is Oskar Lafontaine, until 1999 the SPD chairman and architect of the SPD-Green election victory in 1998. The Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism is the successor to the party of state in the former East Germany, the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED).

As different as the histories of the SPD and SED were, they nevertheless have one thing in common: both regarded their task in preventing any independent movement of the working class and as guarantors of "social stability." This was also the purpose of their social reforms. In the words of Friedrich Ebert (president of the Weimar Republic), both "hated revolution like sin."

In this regard, nothing has changed in the WASG or the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism. This is the real content of their constant warning that the "social peace" is endangered.

Left Party-PDS leader Gregor Gysi expressed this clearly in his address to the party congress. After longwindedly extolling the praises of the social benefits of the GDR (former East Germany), he explained that while there had been one hundred worlds between the upper and lower layers in this society, today there were "one million worlds" between the unemployed and the top managers. "In the long term, no society can endure that," he said.

It is no surprise that the Left Party and WASG regard themselves as a means to pressure the SPD to become more "social-democratic," as Gysi put it in a press interview on the role of Die Linke.

WASG Chairman Klaus Ernst, formerly a union full-timer in the IG Metall, told the press: "I wish that sometime in the future the SPD would again become a social democratic party. That would make it easier for those seeking to build bridges between the Left Party and the SPD."

In line with this, Oskar Lafontaine, who will form part of a dual party leadership in the merged party together with Lothar Bisky, is being talked about as the sole future leader, if Bisky retires in two years. There is no other figure that so embodies the SPD's role as a factor for social order as he does.

Lafontaine's past, his political concepts and all his actions over the last years prove that he is driven by the fear that the social movement against welfare cuts could slip out of the control of the SPD and the trade unions. A new party led by him would try to place itself at the head of the movement in order to divert it into harmless social democratic channels. He constantly warned of the explosive nature of the political and social opposition in the population evoked by the policies of the SPD-Green Party government.

His strident denunciation of social injustice is pure demagoguery. He always stresses that another more socially balanced policy is feasible within the context of the existing capitalist society. This is political fraud. The globalisation of production has cut away the ground beneath the policies of social reforms. The international capitalist markets dictate economic policy in every country.

Those like Lafontaine, Gysi and Co., who claim there can be a return to the 1970s policies of social reforms under today's conditions, are encouraging dangerous illusions. The liberalisation of international markets, which has led to a catastrophic fall in living conditions for workers all over the world, is not simply a "fashion" nobody has opposed in time—as Lafontaine would have us believe. It is the product of powerful material forces. It is a component of a political offensive of the bourgeois class, which has been under way worldwide for more than 20 years in opposition to the achievements fought for by the workers' movement in the early 1970s.

Social democracy has nothing with which to oppose this offensive and has energetically supported it. This did not begin first after Lafontaine's resignation, but a long time before. If Lafontaine really wanted to oppose big economic interests, as he now loudly claims, he could have proven this when he was minister of finance in the Schröder government and was chairman of the SPD. At that time, he was not prepared to make an appeal to the working class because a serious conflict with the employers' associations would have placed a question over the capitalist order. Instead, he threw in the towel and left the field open for Schröder.

Today, Lafontaine also sees his task in keeping under control the growing opposition to welfare cuts, poverty and war by employing pithy words. He had no scruples in lending verbal support at the WASG congress to the "political mass strike," in a reference to Rosa Luxemburg. But it should be remembered that more than 90 years ago it was Luxemburg who called the SPD, which Lafontaine personifies like no other figure, a stinking corpse.



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