

German Left Party honours the founding of the centrist Independent Social Democratic Party

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At the start of April, the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) issued a press statement to commemorate the founding of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) 90 years ago.

Under the heading “An Outstanding Role Model for Left Politics Today,” the national secretary of the Left Party-PDS, Dietmar Bartsch, described the founding of the USPD in 1917 as an event “worthy of commemoration.” He continued: “The Left Party-PDS, which is in the midst of a process of party reformation with the WASG (Election Alternative group), draws from many traditions. The USPD is one of them. This party maintained the anti-militarist tradition of German social democracy. With it emerged a new mass party and the prerequisite for a left alternative to the SPD (Social Democratic Party).”

Bartsch went on: “The USPD developed under the pressure of the war and as the product of a progressive process of differentiation in the SPD. Important Marxist social democratic theoreticians such as Eduard Bernstein, Rudolf Hilferding and Karl Kautsky, who regarded themselves as the upholders of social democracy, turned to the organisation. In the following years there were uncertainties and intense disputes over the political orientation of the party and its search for a realistic political strategy, conflicts that today one would probably be termed factional fights between ‘realist politicians’ and ‘representatives of the pure line.’ The subsequent splits and new unifications only served to complicate the creation of a uniform mass party which paid attention to the daily demands and needs of workers without yielding its claim to revolutionary, anti-capitalist politics.”

The statement concluded: “The internal struggles over orientation in the following years inevitably led to a further splintering of the workers’ movement and weakened the left in its fight against aspiring fascism. The attempt by Paul Levi to constitute a left socialist mass party based on the unity of the KPD (German Communist Party) and USPD-left, in the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg, failed. In its failure, as in its alternatives, the attempt provides an exemplary lesson for left policy today.”

Bartsch’s compressed history of a seminal political experience in the history of the German working class, i.e., the fate of the USPD, abounds with the type of distortions, half-truths and outright lies that have historically characterised the Stalinist school of falsification. In its own way, the press statement demonstrates the continuity between the method of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its official ideologists, i.e., to twist and manipulate the historical record in order to justify its immediate pragmatic interests, and the political outlook of the Left Party-PDS, which has its origins in the Stalinist East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED).

While his presentation of the USPD is confused and distorted, Bartsch’s intention is clear: to intimidate anybody in the Left Party who raises the slightest criticism of the organisation’s current and thoroughly

opportunist merger process. Any critics of the merger are to be denounced as “representatives of the pure line,” who are sabotaging the efforts of bureaucrats like Bartsch (“realist politicians”) to establish the unification of the PDS and the WASG group on a completely unprincipled basis.

In order to unravel the ambiguities and distortions in Bartsch’s press statement it is necessary to briefly deal with the history of the USPD. Rather than being some sort of role model for a “left-socialist project,” the USPD possessed all of the characteristics of a classic centrist party.

This was the conclusion drawn most clearly by none other than the figure cited by Bartsch to impart some credibility to his presentation—the outstanding revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg. As we will see, there was no more resolute political opponent and ferocious critic of the centrist USPD and its policies than Luxemburg.

In order to explain the origins of the USPD, it is necessary to deal with the historic betrayal carried out by the party from which it emerged—the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). On August 4, 1914, what was the world’s largest Marxist party broke with all of its socialist principles and voted in parliament in favour of credits to support the imperialist war policy of the German bourgeois government. Despite the fact that 14 deputies from the SPD fraction had opposed the move in an internal party vote (with 78 in favour), the entire fraction voted for war credits on the basis of maintaining party discipline. Notoriously, one of the SPD deputies to vote “no” in the internal party fraction vote, Hugo Haase, justified his “yes” vote in parliament with the argument: “We will not desert our fatherland in its time of need.”

In its initial stages, the German war effort enjoyed broad popular support. The only politically conscious and principled opposition to the war came in the form of the small group of oppositionists led by Karl Liebknecht, the first SPD deputy to vote (December 1914) against war credits, and Rosa Luxemburg, who formed their own organisation inside the SPD—the International Group. In 1916 they published the first edition of their own newspaper, *International*, and renamed their fraction inside the SPD the Spartacus group.

It was only after years of war, devastation and slaughter that a larger group emerged within the SPD which articulated tactical differences with official German war policy. It was this group, including many of the long-time leading figures of the SPD such as Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein and Rudolph Hilferding, which founded the USPD as an independent organisation in January 1917—but only after being expelled from the SPD by the party’s right wing.

Kautsky, Bernstein and Hilferding had all played leading roles in the rightward drift of the SPD in the first years of the twentieth century and its eventual break with Marxism in 1914, but now they paid the price for the logic of their policies—expulsion from the party by a cabal of even more right-wing leaders (notably, Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann) in

alliance with the trade union leaders.

Tens of thousands of ordinary workers and party members rallied to the USPD, and under these conditions the Spartacus group decided to join the USPD in April 1917. Spartacus retained its own independent status and, under the leadership of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, sought to win influence amongst the rank and file of the USPD with a merciless criticism of the vacillations of the USPD leadership.

In November 1918, Luxemburg delivered her own devastating critique of the formation of the USPD: "The Independent Social Democracy is innately a weak child, and its essence is compromise.... Its official birth as an independent party is not an act of manly resolution or clear decision on the basis of individual initiative, not a historic deed, but rather the enforced result of being thrown out by the Scheidemanns—an episode of sordid wrangling over 'party discipline' which brought shame to the banner of socialism."

Luxemburg made clear that rather than being the embodiment of anti-militarism, as Bartsch maintained in his press statement, the USPD had served to mask the realities of the war and militarism. She continued: "The origins also corresponded to the life history of the party: it always trotted behind developments, never aspired to leadership.... It expressed its fervent enthusiasm for every iridescent ambiguity which led to the confusion of the masses—peace armistices, the League of Nations, disarmament, the Wilson-cult—all of the phrases of bourgeois demagoguery which during the war spread a dark veil over the naked, blunt fact of a revolutionary alternative."

In the same article, Luxemburg went on to describe the way in which the USPD leaders capitulated to the right wing of the SPD. Having been savagely condemned by the right-wing leadership—in particular, Ebert and Scheidemann—for their subdued criticism of the war, the first response of USPD leaders to the outbreak of revolution in Germany in November 1918 was to rush to form a joint government with the very same people who had thrown them out of the SPD.

On November 10, the second day of the revolution, three leading members of the USPD, including Hugo Haase, formed a government with three leading members of the SPD, including Ebert and Scheidemann. Luxemburg lashed the USPD leadership for its lack of principle and said of the party: "Its politics, its principles scattered like drifting sand ... its first act after the revolution was to unite with Scheidemann-Ebert in a joint government and then to proclaim this prostitution of its own principles to be 'pure socialist politics.'"

Six weeks later, on December 28, the USPD deputies quit their alliance with the right wing of the SPD after it became clear that the promises made by the latter were utterly hypocritical. Instead of assisting in the construction of a socialist workers' republic, the SPD was actively assembling the forces for the bloody suppression of the revolution.

Drawing the consequences from the betrayals of the SPD and the USPD, Luxemburg and Liebknecht proceeded to found the German Communist Party (KPD) at the end of 1918. In the newspaper of the Spartacus League, *Die Rote Fahne*, on January 13, 1919, Luxemburg summed up the disastrous role played by the USPD in the November Revolution. While the three USPD leaders had quit the coalition in December, Luxemburg made clear that the USPD was intent on re-establishing an alliance with the SPD.

She wrote: "The Haase party is attempting to use the crisis to establish a coalition government 'of all socialist tendencies.' This is quite in keeping with Haase's underhanded policy of drowning all inner contradictions of the revolution in an indiscriminate melange, of concealing all contradictions and dissolving the fighting energy of the masses in a putrid compromise. Only the 'compromised leaders' Ebert, Scheidemann, Landsberg, Noske must leave the scene. Only a change in personnel need take place, but just as before, Scheidemann's policies should remain at the helm, and 'all socialist tendencies' should form a joint government on

their basis.

"Today, in view of the bodies of murdered proletarians, in view of the bloody orgies of Scheidemann, et al., the 'Spartacists' have a contempt grown tenfold and a clenched fist for this miserable policy of compromise and betrayal of the cause of the revolution. The Haase people's empty phrases about a coalition 'of all socialist tendencies' are in reality a repetition of the former well-known combination: Scheidemann and the Independents. All the USPD's great to-do about 'unification' amounts to is the resurrection of the Ebert-Haase government with a change in personnel."

Luxemburg's warnings were tragically confirmed by the course of events. The vacillations of the USPD leaders played a crucial role in allowing the SPD leaders to gather the forces for a counterrevolutionary onslaught on the workers' movement. The SPD mobilised Freikorps soldiers to drown the November revolution in blood, and in January 1919 the toll of victims included Luxemburg herself and her closest political collaborator, Karl Liebknecht. The two were murdered in cold blood by mercenaries at the instigation of the SPD leadership. This was the real balance sheet which emerged from the USPD's attempts to achieve an unprincipled unity of "all socialist tendencies."

After an intervention by the Communist International, which following the successful Russian Revolution had won enormous influence in the international workers' movement, a majority of USPD members joined the KPD. Paul Levi, Rosa Luxemburg's successor as head of the KPD and the man singled out for special mention by Bartsch as a protagonist of a "left-socialist project ... in the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg" was, in fact, expelled from the Communist movement in 1921 on the recommendation of Lenin.

Following his expulsion from the Communist Party, Levi founded his own short-lived organisation—the Communist League of Germany (KAG). In 1922, Leon Trotsky scathingly described the KAG as a "sanatorium or rest home for critics" seeking their way back to the USPD. In fact, Levi dissolved his group into a fraction of the USPD, which then fused with the SPD a year later.

Now, 90 years after this tragic episode in the history of the German workers' movement, Left Party leader Bartsch is seeking to rehabilitate the USPD. Rather than providing a "role model for left politics today," the political role of the centrist USPD—"this miserable policy of compromise and betrayal of the cause of the revolution"—is one of the most shameful and disastrous chapters in the history of German working class politics.

The PDS is currently involved in its own sordid and unprincipled fusion with the Election Alternative group to found the Left Party. This is the background to Bartsch's current praise for the USPD. Bartsch seeks to draw from the worst traditions of the USPD—its complete rejection of political principle, i.e., "the pure line," in favour of "realist" politics and "realist politicians."

The nature of such realist politics can currently be seen in Berlin. In the German capital, the Left Party-PDS rules with the SPD in a coalition which has carried out attacks on social benefits far exceeding those carried out by most conservative state governments in Germany. The extra revenue gained by slashing social spending and the impoverishment of tens of thousands of families has been used to pay billions to the shareholders of the bankrupt Berlin Bankgesellschaft.

In the Left Party today there are many leading figures who, in fact, have more in common with the counterrevolutionary right wing of the SPD than with the USPD. When mass strikes broke out in Germany at the start of 1918, SPD leader Ebert intervened to defend the "fatherland." He wrote: "I joined the strike leadership with the clear intention of bringing the strike to a speedy end to prevent damage to the country." A few months later Ebert ("I hate revolution like sin!") collaborated in secret with the German high command to drown the November Revolution in

blood.

The same instincts, i.e., hostility and fear of a mobilisation of the working class, motivated the honorary chairman of the Left Party-PDS, Hans Modrow, at the time of German reunification. Functioning at that time as transitional head of the crumbling East German state, Modrow saw his task as keeping the police-state apparatus intact until the bourgeoisie in the West of the country could take power. In his memoirs of 1991, he wrote: “For me the issue was to maintain the rule of law in the country and prevent chaos.”

Modrow’s attitude to the mass demonstrations against the Stalinist ruling party, the SED, in 1989-1990 was confirmed by comments by the former mayor of Dresden, Wolfgang Berghofer, who recently described Modrow’s role as follows: “We have to break the power of the streets, then we can remain firmly in the saddle and continue as before with new faces. This was, to put it briefly, the strategy of Egon Krenz (successor to East German leader Erich Honecker) and, with variations, also Hans Modrow.”

There is a logic in drawing historical parallels. In its glorification of the USPD, the leadership of the Left Party-PDS seeks to revive the traditions of an organisation which played a key role in betraying the German revolution of 1918. It would be very wrong to conclude, however, that the Left Party-PDS is merely a centrist organisation in the manner of the USPD.

The tradition and politics of the PDS are based on decades of Stalinist subordination of the working class in the former East Germany. Its bride, the Election Alternative—led by former SPD Chairman Oskar Lafontaine—consists mainly of long-time trade union bureaucrats and former members of the SPD, who have their own long history of suppressing any independent movement of the working class.

Rather than constituting a new opportunity for a “united left,” the Left Party is a cynical bureaucratic manoeuvre between two organisations embodying the worst traditions of the workers’ movement. Clarification of these historical lessons is a vital part of the preparation of a genuine revolutionary alternative for the working class.



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