

# Germany: The founding of the "Left Party"

## Oskar Lafontaine's demagogic clichés

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At the recent founding conference of the “Left Party”—through the merging of the Party of Democratic Socialism-Left Party and the Election Alternative—the speech by co-chairman Oskar Lafontaine met with a storm of enthusiasm and standing ovations from the delegates and guests. Lafontaine styled himself in the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, fulminating against war and capitalism, and expressing his support for the general strike “as a means of democratic struggle.”

However, if his words are examined somewhat more closely, it is clear that the radical clichés served only to cover over his complete adaptation to the existing bourgeois order. As in his earlier speeches and writings, Lafontaine’s main theme was to advocate a return to the policy of social reforms that was practiced in the 1970s in West Germany. Accordingly, the third role model he cited, alongside Liebknecht and Luxemburg, was the social democratic chancellor of that time, Willy Brandt.

Nowhere in his speech did Lafontaine deal with the fact that the globalisation of production has undermined the policy of social reformism. He did not mention the fact that the decline of social democracy is a worldwide phenomenon. Neither did he draw up a balance sheet of the policy and role of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), in which he was a member for 40 years, including serving as its chairman. It was a speech full of subterfuge and contradictions, which sought to suffocate any serious thought—a deliberately diversionary political manoeuvre.

Twelve years earlier, Lafontaine delivered a similar speech at the SPD’s Mannheim party congress. At that time, he also appealed to “the hopes of millions” and pledged himself to a “left of centre majority” ; whereupon he was elected chairman of the SPD, much to the surprise of the incumbent Rudolf Scharping.

In his recent speech, he characterised the SPD functionaries—the same ones who acclaimed him 12 years ago—as “reformist hooligans,” whose retrogressive measures had destroyed the welfare state in the subsequent years. Lafontaine did not explain how this had come about and what lessons should be drawn.

As SPD chairman, Lafontaine was the architect of the SPD-Green Party coalition following the election victory of 1998.

His resignation as finance minister and party chairman a few months later does not change the fact that the Gerhard Schröder (SPD)-Joschka Fischer (Green Party) government was the result of his project of bringing the two parties together in office. He shares responsibility for the social misery about which he now loudly complains.

Today, Lafontaine no longer advocates an SPD-Green Party alliance, but one between the SPD and the newly founded Left Party he leads. His aim is to establish coalitions between the Left Party and SPD at the federal and state level. He claims the Left Party would drive the SPD forward towards social reforms. After everything that has happened over the past years, anyone who believes this is either politically naive or a willing dupe.

The delegates at the founding congress of the Left Party in Berlin only needed to look out of the window. For six years, Berlin city hall has been governed by the SPD in alliance with the Party of Democratic Socialism. The precursor to the Left Party has already shown what the radical clichés uttered at its party congresses really mean when they are put into practice and it assumes government responsibility.

Under the rule of the SPD-PDS coalition in the Berlin city legislature, some 15,000 public service jobs have been destroyed, salaries cut by 10 percent, drastic reductions implemented in pay and staffing in public transport and at universities and schools, as well as the imposition of large increases in student fees and child care charges. Furthermore, 65,000 dwellings belonging to the GSW public housing corporation were sold off to the American investor and speculator Cerberus. This all puts Berlin in top place among Germany’s länder (states) when it comes to public sector cuts.

More clearly than in his earlier speeches, Lafontaine portrayed the welfare state as a pillar of bourgeois social order.

“We are the party of the welfare state,” he told the delegates, and stressed why it was so dangerous to systematically dismantle such a set-up—because “millions of Germans identified it with their state.” If people had been asked in the past, “what do you value about your state, your nation, then they would have said the welfare state,” Lafontaine said. He warned that the destruction of the welfare state leads to the destabilisation of the existing social order; the “reformist

hooligans” had no idea how dangerous their neo-liberal policies were.

By “defending the welfare state” Lafontaine means subordination to the national state. It should not be accepted that “robber baron capitalism, the finance capitalism operating worldwide should do so without the national states putting an end to its negative activities and imposing limits,” he said.

This appeal for the national state to impose limits on international capitalism is reactionary and utopian. It boils down to protectionist measures and the walling off the borders. It stands contrary to a socialist perspective, which counterposes to global capital the international unity of the working class. It serves to divide the working class, orienting workers to the national interests of “their own” country.

This nationalist orientation weighs far more heavily than everything else that Lafontaine said in his speech against the Iraq war and the deployment of Germany’s armed forces in Afghanistan—and as always using grandiose clichés. Thus, he quoted the French socialist Jean Jaurès, who on the eve of the First World War said, “Capitalism carries war within itself as do clouds the rain!”

But subordination to the national state and national interests is the direct precursor to supporting imperialist wars, which are always justified in the name of the national interest. Nobody has made this clearer historically than the SPD, when the party voted for war credits in August 1914. In this question too, Lafontaine is a social democrat through and through.

Lafontaine’s nationalist reaction to globalisation is directly linked to his social orientation. The Left Party regards the effects of globalisation from the same view point as a small businessperson, who feels threatened by the power of the global corporations and who calls upon the national state for help in order to impose customs barriers, tax reductions and other protectionist measures and competitive advantages.

Lafontaine said that there were 3 million small enterprises in Germany, “which employ fewer than 10 people and have a turnover of less than €10 million.” These are “important enterprises in our national economy” and represent the “most important partners” for the Left Party, because “even in these, exploitation and self exploitation can be found.” These small firms have to be particularly fostered, according to Lafontaine.

The collaboration of the Left Party and the trade union bureaucracy also runs along the same nationalist lines. All the executive committee speakers—Gregor Gysi, Lothar Bisky and Lafontaine—emphasised the presence at the party congress of a large number of union officials and official delegations from individual domestic and foreign trade unions. While millions of workers daily experience the fact that union officials and the works councils collaborate closely with the corporate boards of directors as accomplices in implementing lower wages and welfare cuts, the Left Party praises the union bureaucracy as its most important political ally.

Fausto Bertinotti, the chairman of the Italian party

Rifondazione Comunista, was also fêted at the congress as a “long-standing friend.” This, more than anything else, makes clear where the political journey of the Left Party is heading.

For quite some time, Rifondazione Comunista has been heralded by so-called “lefts” throughout Europe as the shining example for a “left-wing party,” like the one that has now been founded in Germany. Like the Party of Democratic Socialism, Rifondazione Comunista developed in 1991 as a product of the decay of Stalinism. At that time, Bertinotti, who began his political career in the Socialist Party under Bettino Craxi, crossing over to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1967 and afterwards making his livelihood as a trade union functionary, rejected the transformation of the Italian Communist Party into an openly social democratic party, instead creating Rifondazione, in which numerous old Stalinists and their hangers-on once again found a home.

In spring of last year, Bertinotti was elected president of the chamber of deputies in Rome. Not only did he thereby take on the third-highest public office in Italy, but his party also became an important prop of the Prodi government, which is carrying out harsh attacks against the working class and has sent Italian troops to Afghanistan and Lebanon.

Summarising Lafontaine’s speech and developments at the congress, the following balance sheet can be drawn up: The Left Party is not an imperfect or confused expression of political ferment and the search for viable answers to the great problems of society. It does not reflect the moods that now prevail in workplaces and which could be seen in the readiness to strike by workers at Deutsche Telekom, Airbus or in the auto industry.

Rather, in view of increasing disillusionment with the SPD, the Left Party is trying to create a bureaucratic instrument that can suppress any debate over socialist perspectives and prevent a radicalisation of the working class. While many disillusioned workers are turning away from the SPD, the Left Party seeks to preserve illusions in a social reformist programme.



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