

Germany: What does the “Left Party” want to achieve?

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The founding of a new party is not an everyday occurrence and should be given careful attention. That also applies to the “Left Party,” founded on Saturday June 15 in Berlin through the union of the Left Party- Party of Democratic Socialism and the Election Alternative—work and social justice (WASG).

Alongside the political and personal intentions of those founding a party, objective factors also play a role in its emergence. A new party can apprehend subterranean social changes, articulate them and so prepare the future. Or it can be a reaction, becoming a political obstacle for the development of the masses. In the first instance, the party will be energetic, decisive and bold; in the second, conservative, marked by half-measures and ambiguities.

The “Left Party” belongs clearly in the second category. At its birth, it already bears all the characteristics of old age.

This can already be seen on first glance. The average age of the 72,000 members is 65, while that of the 60,000 coming from the Left Party-PDS is 70. The party leadership—consisting of Lothar Bisky (65), Oskar Lafontaine (63), Gregor Gysi (60) and treasurer Karl Holluba (62)—are approaching pension age and have occupied high state and party offices for many decades in east and west Germany.

To use the term “new” to describe this organisation is a fraud. Organizationally and its heritage ties it seamlessly to the PDS and its predecessor the SED, the former Stalinist state party of the German Democratic Republic, whose apparatus and property it has acquired. In addition, it is joined by a gaggle of former SPD members—to a large extent full-time union officials under the leadership of the former SPD chairman, federal finance minister, state premier of Saarland and mayor of Saarbrücken Oskar Lafontaine.

Internally, the new party is also showing signs of all the infirmities of old age and of decline. Even before the party was officially established, a strong right-wing grouping has formed under the name the “Forum for Democratic Socialism.”

The forum claims to speak in the name of the officeholders and elected representatives of the Party of Democratic Socialism, of “several thousand democratic socialists” who have “won parliamentary mandates or who occupy political office.” The forum is led by Stefan Liebich, the former regional chairman of the PDS Berlin regional organisation and a vehement advocate of the party’s participation in the Senate (Berlin city legislature).

The forum’s founding statement now carries 449 signatures, including three members of the Berlin Senate, the majority of the

old PDS party executive committee, 10 members of the Bundestag (federal parliament), state parliamentary party heads from Saxony Anhalt, Berlin, Saxony and Brandenburg, as well as regional party chairmen, former ministers, district authority chiefs and mayors. Stating that it is necessary to establish “a productive balance between protest, the desire to shape society, and democratic socialist alternatives that point beyond present conditions,” it defends participation in state and local governments in the former East Germany.

The purpose of this government participation is disputed, particularly in the WASG. Since the party seeks to present itself in west Germany as a “left-wing” alternative to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to win office and influence, it is somewhat embarrassing if in the east, the same party has rooted itself in ministries and municipal administrations and is cooperating closely with the SPD and even with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

This contradiction is not of a fundamental nature. In east Germany, the Left Party is already in the place where it still wants to arrive in the west. Therefore it does not want its “desire to shape society,” its “government experience”—as the conduct of bourgeois government business is euphemistically described in the party jargon—to be threatened by the blustering left-wing populism of some WASG bigwigs. Otherwise, as the forum’s statement puts it, the Left Party will fall “behind the requirements of real life.”

Two years of internal factional fights, plots and manoeuvres have preceded the founding of the party, several times threatening to bring the entire project to the brink of failure. The fact it has finally come into being is a result of profound social changes. The rightward turn of the SPD, the vote to participate in war and the substantial welfare cuts under the Schröder government and above all the Hartz laws it passed “reforming” welfare and unemployment benefits have resulted in declining SPD membership and the alienation of the party from masses of voters, allowing a political vacuum to develop that the Left Party is seeking to fill.

Often, the organisation has been surprised by its own election successes, as was recently the case in the city-state of Bremen, where with 8.4 percent of the vote it entered a state parliament in west Germany for the first time. And this despite (or rather because) the party’s lead candidate in Bremen had been rejected by the national party leadership and received no support from Berlin.

One opinion poll found that 47 percent of voters in east Germany welcome the establishment of the Left Party; with a 27 percent rating the party would sit between the SPD (29 percent) and the CDU (25 percent) if elections to the Bundestag were held today.

The unarticulated hopes that are linked with the establishment of the Left Party are, however, built on sand. The party has firmly decided to put a stop to the left-wing development from which it has profited in elections, and to return to the fold of the SPD. Its perspective is not to shape a new future but to revive the past.

It tirelessly encourages the illusion that the social reformist policies of the 1970s can be reanimated in the age of globalization. It does so completely ignoring the fact that these policies have failed worldwide and that all social reformist parties *without exception*—including its own regional organizations that have taken over government responsibility—have moved far to the right.

Everything the party leaders say speaks of their desire to cooperate with the SPD as soon as it makes some left-wing gesture. Thus WASG founder Klaus Ernst announced in the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* newspaper, “We are pushing the SPD to the left.”

“The Left party will take up certain social democratic positions, which today’s SPD has abandoned to the frustration of its voters and members,” Klaus continued. “And there will be points when the SPD moves again to the left. Thus there are also possibilities for a common policy, for coalitions, no question about it. The precondition is, however, that the social democracy carries out an internal process of purification.”

There is about as much chance that the SPD will move “to the left again” as there is a chance that the sun will set in the west and rise in the east. Like the rightward turn of the British Labour Party under Tony Blair, the French Socialist Party under Segolene Royal or the Italian Left Democrats under Massimo D’Alema, the rightward development of the SPD under Gerhard Schröder is not the result of the “betrayal” of individuals but the impossibility of reconciling class contradictions in the age of global financial markets and production. It is not only the SPD as an organization that has suffered a shipwreck, but the programme of social reformism that the Left Party is now seeking desperately to reanimate.

The words of Ernst, a highly paid IG-Metall union functionary, speak of the fear of the union bureaucracy that the widening gulf between the SPD and the working class can have revolutionary consequences. It is no coincidence that the WASG developed as a reaction to the Hartz welfare “reforms,” when many voters and members turned away from the SPD and the Monday demonstrations (which had preceded the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989) spontaneously began again.

No one understands this better than Oskar Lafontaine, the future chairman of the Left Party, who for 40 years held offices in the SPD. Lafontaine knows how to provoke and bluster in order to increase the credibility of his party. But behind this stands a right-wing, social democratic programme. He wants to enter government at the side of the SPD. At a press conference last weekend, he named his conditions: the cancelling of the Hartz laws, the introduction of a minimum wage, the withdrawal of the German Armed Forces from Afghanistan and the reestablishment of the link between pensions and wages—then “the Left Party

would immediately form a government” Lafontaine said.

The Left Party wants to prevent workers and young people drawing revolutionary conclusions from the crisis of capitalist society and from turning to a socialist perspective. Therefore it encourages illusions that capitalism can be reformed. Such a policy is dangerous. The frustration that results inevitably from such disappointed illusions and broken election promises forms fertile soil for right-wing extremist forces. In Mecklenburg Pomerania and in Saxony Anhalt, government participation by the PDS has been followed by a substantial increase in the vote for the right-wing German Peoples Union (DVU) and German National Party (NPD).

The Left Party maintains a foundation that bears the name of Rosa Luxemburg. Just as the Stalinists once embalmed Lenin’s body and placed it on public display in order to supplant his revolutionary spirit, the Left Party upholds the memory of the great Marxist Rosa Luxemburg in order to bury her sharp, revolutionary character.

It is worthwhile to revisit what Luxemburg wrote some 90 years ago concerning the establishment of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), the ideological ancestors of today’s Left Party. “The Independent Social Democratic Party is innately a child of weakness, and compromise is in its very nature,” she wrote. “It toddles behind events and developments, never walking ... Each dazzling ambiguity, which led to the confusion of the masses ... found its eager support ... A party constituted in this way, suddenly posed before the historical decisions of the revolution, had to fail deplorably ... its politics, its tactics, its principles scattering like sand.”

These words could have been written about the founding of the Left Party. This squad of old men is not shining a light into the future, but represent a backward-looking reaction, a political obstacle that the working class should pass over as swiftly as possible.



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