

Founding conference of German Left Party in Hessen

Aged trade unionists, disgruntled Social Democrats and former Stalinists

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Anyone entering the founding congress of the Left Party held in the city of Frankfurt-Main last Saturday was inevitably reminded of the musty atmosphere of a run-of-the-mill trade union gathering. The overwhelming majority of the some 300 delegates and guests attending the congress obviously had known one another for years, if not decades. Most had already reached, or exceeded, retirement age.

Striking was the absence of younger delegates, who might have expressed some curiosity or enthusiasm, as one would expect at a founding conference. The few young people present spoke in the manner of young trade union functionaries. Nothing new was on offer—only the same old monotonous tune.

The chairman of the Hessian trade union federation (DGB) gave a fulsome welcome when the main speaker and party chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, entered the hall along with his entourage. Delegates stood to applaud, shouting: “Oskar! Oskar!”

It is characteristic of this “new” party that it frenetically idolises a man who spent forty years as a prominent functionary in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and was its chairman just eight years ago. The Frankfurt conference graphically illustrated the character of the Left Party: it is an association of veteran trade unionists, disgruntled social democrats and former Stalinists from both the east and west of the country—men and women who were actively engaged in, and profited from, the German system of social partnership between the trade unions and management over many decades. Now they are responding with alarm to the eruption of fresh class conflicts.

The perspective of the Left Party is not directed towards the future, i.e., the building of a new society, which enables the social and cultural development of mankind based on modern technology and the international forces of production, but rather to the past, when it was still possible to reconcile class contradictions in a peaceful fashion and the national state was still largely intact. The party is intent on ensuring that broad social layers draw absolutely no lessons from the collapse of social democracy and the trade unions, thereby blocking the way to a new political perspective.

Oskar Lafontaine is canny enough to express this standpoint, and this has helped make him the undisputed leader of the Left Party. The same refrain is to be heard in all his speeches: condemnation of the anti-social policies of the current and preceding government, complaints about the “insanity” of international economic policy in general, and German policy in particular, and a replay of long since outmoded social democratic recipes.

He made just such a demagogic speech in Frankfurt: When the current SPD Chairman Kurt Beck recently called for an increase in the average

work life, this could be explained only on the basis of “mental confusion.”

“Where was Kurt Beck when his party, in alliance with the Greens, lowered pensions? And who, if not Franz Müntefering (the current SPD vice chancellor), has advocated an increase in the retirement age?” Etc. etc...

The aging delegates were inspired, and reacted like teenagers at a pop concert. Every other sentence from Lafontaine was acknowledged with applause and cries of “bravo!” Just a few clichés criticising official policy were sufficient to provoke waves of enthusiasm from this audience of disillusioned social democrats and frustrated trade union bureaucrats.

But in this respect the delegates stand alone. It may be the case that the Left Party is currently able to win votes in the absence of any political alternative to the ruling grand coalition (SPD, Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union), but there is, nevertheless, a deep divide between the party and the mass of workers and young people.

The latter are confronted on a daily basis with issues and problems requiring serious political answers, rather than the putrid clichés of Lafontaine, who promises them a return to the golden age of social reforms. They are personally experiencing and suffering from the effects of the social crisis and know—without Lafontaine’s rhetoric—who is responsible for the introduction of Hartz IV laws and other draconian measures aimed at undermining the German welfare state.

Workers in factories and offices are confronted with the reality that fear of being reduced to an existence of dependence on Hartz IV welfare payments is deliberately used by employers to impose wage and welfare cuts. They constantly experience the repercussions arising from the globalisation of production, which has fundamentally changed the political framework and stripped away the basis for policies based on reconciliation between the classes.

Workers have also experienced how the policy of social partnership has been used to undermine their own interests. Whether it is the case of Opel Motors, Siemens, Telekom or German Railways, union officials and work councils have played a key role in implementing layoffs and welfare cuts, while working to suffocate any form of opposition to such measures.

It is characteristic that the Left Party seeks to establish the closest relations with precisely such trade union functionaries. A high-ranking DGB delegation had already attended the federal founding congress of the Left Party in Berlin. This delegation included the head of the Transnet railway workers union, Norbert Hansen, who has recently been active organising strike-breaking against train drivers. In Frankfurt, Lafontaine expressly praised the trade unions as the “most important ally” of the Left Party.

While in the east of the country the Left Party draws its main support

from the residues of the Stalinist SED bureaucracy, in the west the party is mainly reliant on the trade union bureaucracy. Many prominent members of the party are either full-time trade union or works council officials.

The plan at the Frankfurt congress was to ensure the nomination of Dieter Hooge, the former chairman of the Hessian DGB, as leading candidate of the party for state elections due at the start of 2008. Lafontaine had personally backed the nomination of Hooge.

Hooge embodies both the decline and the turn to the right of the German trade union movement. He graduated from the Academy of Labour (AdA) trade union school at the end of the 1960s and climbed the bureaucratic ladder over the succeeding decades. Although he maintained close relations with the German Communist Party (DKP), he remained a member of the SPD for 40 years. He resigned from the party just three years ago and established the Hessian branch of the Election Alternative group, which subsequently merged with the east German-based Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) to form the Left Party.

In the run-up to the Frankfurt conference and in arrangement with Lafontaine, Hooge allowed himself to be celebrated in the media as the party's leading state candidate and delivered one interview after the other in the course of the congress.

At the last minute, however, delegates delivered a rebuff to Lafontaine and Hooge. On two occasions Hooge failed to acquire the necessary votes for nomination, and then withdrew his candidacy.

In his stead, delegates voted for a long-standing DKP Stalinist, Pit Metz, from Marburg. While in his candidacy speech Hooge had not ruled out collaboration in government with the SPD, Metz made "absolutely clear" that in his opinion the party should play an "oppositional role" in the upcoming state parliament. He said he regarded himself "as a communist" with the perspective of "a change of system," even if the path towards such an end is "very long and stony."

It had evidently dawned on the majority of delegates that the radicalisation of the working class could leave the Left Party far behind if it committed itself too openly to collaboration with the discredited SPD. As *Der Spiegel* noted: "Obviously, some delegates feared that the party would be regarded merely as an organisation for frustrated Social Democrats and trade unionists."

The electoral success notched up by the DKP delegation from Marburg does nothing to change the general orientation of the party. Prior to German reunification, the DKP had functioned as a West German adjunct of the East German state party and enjoyed considerable financial support from East Berlin. Although the organisation was condemned to the existence of a pariah in most trade unions, it took over the role of watch dog for the trade union bureaucracy. Whoever criticised the union leadership from the left had to reckon with the stewards, or even thugs, of the DKP. Particularly in the fight against real or alleged Trotskyists, the trade union bureaucracy could always rely on the DKP.

As the unions lost influence in the 1980s and 1990s, active and former DKP members were increasingly able to take over leading positions in trade union committees. Pit Metz is a long-time leading functionary of the Verdi public service trade union, and for the last one-and-a-half decades full-time works council chairman at an institute for the blind in Marburg.

Anyone with experience of right-wing trade union bureaucrats is well aware of their utterly impudent way of telling lies, but in the figure of Lafontaine they have met their master.

In Frankfurt he unleashed salvos against the "lack of credibility in official politics," which has been met by the populace with "a growing turn away from parties and with abstention."

"One cannot be for and against something at the same time," he continued. "One cannot be against welfare cuts, but support Hartz IV. One cannot be for contract agreements and decent wages, and at the same time organize huge wage cuts. One cannot be against war and then vote in favour of war in parliament."

But this raises the question of the credibility of Lafontaine and his own party.

As chairman of the SPD in 1998, Lafontaine was the architect of the SPD-Green coalition, which introduced Hartz IV and the most comprehensive tax reductions for the rich in the history of the Federal Republic. As finance minister and deputy head of government, he was in a position to implement some of the social measures which he now so loudly advocates. In the event, he did nothing of the sort, and instead quit his posts without explanation, leaving the way free for Gerhard Schröder.

It is not necessary to go far back into history to demonstrate the hypocrisy and deceitfulness which characterises every aspect of the Left Party. For the past six years the party has sat in power in the Berlin Senate and carried out policies diametrically opposed to the current party programme.

In coalition with the SPD, the Left Party in Berlin has cut 15,000 jobs in public service and imposed wage cuts of ten percent. The state coalition has pushed through massive job cuts and wage cuts in public transport, universities and schools, as well as increasing fees for nursery and pre-school education. In addition, the Senate sold off 65,000 state-owned dwellings to the US investor and speculator Cerberus. Berlin occupies first place amongst German states when it comes to cuts in public services.

So much for Lafontaine's claim that one cannot "be for and against something at the same time."

Rather than providing an alternative to the hypocrisy of the main political parties, the Left Party has merely added a new dimension in terms of deceitfulness. The party is not an alternative to social democracy, but rather a means of intercepting disillusioned social democrats and retaining them within the sphere of social democracy.

The SPD has constituted one of the main props of bourgeois rule in Germany since its decision to vote in favour of war credits in 1914. Then, at the end of the war, the SPD bloodily suppressed the proletarian revolution.

Five years later it rescued bourgeois rule during the revolutionary crisis and hyperinflation of 1923. At the start of the 1930s the party supported the reactionary Brüning government, which imposed emergency decrees and opened the way for the dictatorship of the Nazis.

Following the Second World War and fascism, the SPD played an important role in stabilising the post-war Federal Republic. At the end of the 1960s it blunted the movement of radicalised students with slogans such as "dare more democracy!" while appeasing workers with a few concessions. Finally, under the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder, the SPD smashed up what remained of post-war social gains.

The resulting massive loss in membership and votes for the SPD has alarmed Lafontaine and the trade union leaders. They are opposed to thoughtlessly yielding up and wrecking social democracy as an important prop of bourgeois rule. They are firmly convinced that the maintenance of social democratic reformism—albeit in the new form of the Left Party—is crucial for the defence of the bourgeois order. This is why the Left Party seeks to form an alliance with the SPD whenever and wherever possible.



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