

German Left Party leadership forces Hesse state candidate to resign

Ulrich Rippert
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At the founding conference of the Left Party in Hesse state two weeks ago in Frankfurt-Main, party chairman Oskar Lafontaine praised the merits of internal party democracy. He quoted former Social Democrat (SPD) leader Willy Brandt's slogan "Dare more democracy!" and announced that the democratisation of society began with the development of internal party democracy.

"In our party, policy is determined by the democratic decision of the membership," Lafontaine proclaimed. "In all important questions concerning political direction we will conduct a referendum of members and ensure that the opinion of the base of the party is not only heard, but is also heeded."

The delegates, comprising mainly aging bureaucrats from the trade unions and the SPD, as well as the two fraternal Stalinist organisations—the German Communist Party (DKP) and Socialist Unity Party (SED)—responded with enthusiasm and prolonged applause.

It took just eight days, however, before the Left Party publicly demonstrated in practice its conception of internal party democracy. The party executive committee forced the leading candidate for the upcoming Hesse state election to resign "voluntarily"—although he had won the votes of the large majority of the party congress and had stood in opposition to the candidate proposed by the executive committee.

What took place?

Prior to the Hesse conference, Lafontaine had already set his sights on a leading candidate for the state election due to take place at the end of January. His nominee was the former chairman of the Hesse trade union federation (DGB), Dieter Hooge, who had been a member of the SPD for 40 years and has had longstanding links with Lafontaine. Hooge had resigned from the SPD just three years ago in order to establish the Election Alternative (WASG) group in Hesse. The Left Party emerged recently as a merger of the WASG with the post-Stalinist Party of

Democratic Socialism (PDS).

In collaboration with Lafontaine, Hooge appeared before the press in the run-up to the Frankfurt conference, and his selection as the leading candidate of the Left Party was treated by the media as a done deal. During the congress, he granted one interview after the other to the press.

Party delegates, however, refused to follow the script laid down by Lafontaine, and on two occasions Hooge failed to win a majority for his nomination. Instead, delegates voted by a clear majority in favour of long-time DKP member Pit Metz as the leading candidate for the state election.

The decision flew in the face of the plan worked out by the party leadership. In nominating Hooge, Lafontaine had in mind wide-reaching political plans, which he did not want to discuss in public. Just as was the case with the launch of the Greens, Lafontaine regards Hesse as a test case for future participation in a national government.

Twenty-two years ago in Hesse, Joschka Fischer became the first representative of the Green Party to enter a state government in a coalition with the SPD, led by Holger Börner. The move was of enormous significance. No longer were the Greens regarded as an object of disdain. In Frankfurt, they demonstrated they could play the role of a responsible partner in government. The way was free for the participation of the Greens in a national government.

The 63-year-old Hooge, who is enjoying life as an early pensioner after retiring from his well-paid posts with the DGB, has important contacts within the trade unions and SPD in Hesse. Lafontaine was keen to exploit these connections in order to assist the entry of his party into the state parliament and—should conditions permit—present the Left Party as a coalition partner for the SPD.

Although he knew that many delegates felt that it was too soon to participate in a coalition with the SPD, Hooge

clearly indicated in his candidacy speech that he favoured such participation “if the SPD politically moves on some questions.” For his part, Pit Metz had declared that for him it was “absolutely clear” that following the forthcoming state election, the Left Party should “clearly play the role of opposition.”

Metz was able to win support for his position, but the party’s executive committee never contemplated accepting the decision of the party congress. It set all possible levers in motion and resorted to bureaucratic tricks aimed at enforcing Metz’s resignation. Eight days later, the decision of congress delegates was revised.

The first step of the party executive was to exploit a media campaign, a method that has been used repeatedly to discredit left-wing candidates.

When asked by a journalist how Metz, as a veteran member of the DKP, responded to the shoot-to-kill policy employed by the former East German police force at the inner German border, Metz responded that many countries secure their borders with military force. He went on to remark that such a policy differs little from that adopted by a country that invades a foreign country, as is currently the case of the German army in Afghanistan.

In fact, Lafontaine had made similar comments just a few weeks ago in the course of a television broadcast, in which he asserted that the definition of terrorism used by the German government could also be extended to German soldiers serving in Afghanistan. In the case of Metz, however, the Left Party’s executive responded by declaring his comments “completely inappropriate” and demanded clarification. A number of executive members dissociated themselves from Metz by describing his statements as “awkward” or dismissing them as the product of someone “inexperienced in handling the media.”

At the same time, Hooge’s contacts in the regional organisation in Hesse were activated and asked to make clear that they were not prepared to conduct an election campaign with Metz as candidate.

Metz was then “invited” to hold discussions with the party leadership in Berlin and was called upon to explain his position in the offices of Gregor Gysi, Lothar Bisky, national manager Dietmar Bartsch and Oskar Lafontaine.

While he was running the gauntlet in Berlin, media sources announced that the party organisation in the Hesse locality of Odenwald had distributed an open letter accusing Metz of denying—in his “old cadre twaddle”—any chance for the Left Party in the state election. In Berlin, Metz was told that similar reactions could be expected

from other local federations. It was against this background that Metz was then politely asked whether he thought it appropriate to continue with his candidacy.

One day after his trip to Berlin, Metz declared his resignation as leading candidate in Hesse. On the same day, the Left Party’s national election campaign manager, Bodo Ramelow, turned up to assist the state out of its crisis and told the press that the party’s executive committee respects the “personal decision” made by Metz.

“It is a decision that we respect,” Lafontaine told the *Tagesspiegel*. Left Party leader Lothar Bisky added, “As far as I know, nobody forced him to do it.”

In fairness, one must say that party delegates got what they deserved. After all, can one really expect a party that represents a fusion of the tradition of Stalinism with that of the SPD and the trade union bureaucracy to be a hotbed of thriving democracy?

For his part, Pit Metz reacted like a whipped dog. The DKP Stalinist pledged that he would throw himself into the struggle over the next weeks and months in order to eliminate any misunderstandings, and demonstrate that the “party was highly motivated and acting in unison.”

The episode in Hesse casts a characteristic light on how the Left Party will treat the population at large should it enter into government at a national level. The inhabitants of Berlin, governed for the past seven years by a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party, have already gone through this experience. In Berlin, the delegates of the Left Party regularly support measures in the Senate that they had previously deplored in their election programme.



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