

“Marx is a must” conference in Berlin: Providing cover for the social democratic bureaucracies

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On November 1-4, the Marx21 group, a faction within the German Left Party, held a conference entitled “Marx ist muss” (Marx is a must) in Berlin.

Marx21 was formed as a result of the liquidation of the Linksruck group, and since September this year has operated exclusively within the Left Party. It has taken on the job of implanting a few young people into the Left Party, an organisation largely comprised of older members, while providing it with a pseudo-Marxist fig leaf. The positions outlined at the congress mark a further turn to the right for Marx21.

The conference organisers had expected around 1,000 participants. At the main event on the Saturday, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters counted only around 150 attendees. Looking around the hall, one searched in vain for new faces.

In the main, the participants consisted of long-term members of the Linksruck group as well as established representatives of the Left Party, including Norman Paech, Tobias Pflüger and Wolfgang Gehrcke. The latter, however, only remained at the conference for the duration of the podium discussions in which they participated.

The dissolution of Linksruck into the Left Party was completely consistent with the political line of this organisation. Linksruck was formed in 1993 when the SAG (Sozialistische Arbeitergruppe—Socialist Workers Group) was disbanded and merged with the youth organisation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—the Jusos. During the period when it changed its name and orientation, the group continued to maintain close ties to the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as well as its membership in the International Socialist Tendency (IST).

The British SWP was first founded as the Socialist Review Group by Tony Cliff on the basis of a break with the Fourth International and Trotskyism. This political tendency had drawn the conclusion, based on the relative stabilisation of capitalism on the one hand and the consolidation of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on the other, that the Trotskyist perspective of building an independent political party of the working class was not viable.

This argumentation was used by the SWP to adapt itself uncritically to the social democratic and trade union bureaucracies. Tony Cliff characterised the Soviet Union as state capitalist and refused to defend it against imperialist attacks. He elevated the ruling bureaucracy to the historical status of a new ruling class. The Fourth International, on the contrary, had identified the Soviet bureaucracy as a parasitic caste within the degenerated workers’ state that had to be removed through a political revolution.

The adaptation to the bureaucracies in the East and West served as the political line for the entire existence of the IST. In 1998, this led its German section, Linksruck, to call for the election of Gerhard Schröder and the SPD, whose government went on to carry out the most severe

attacks against the rights of workers since the founding of the Federal Republic.

Since then, social tensions have sharpened enormously. In recent years, millions of German workers have left the SPD and the trade unions. In 1990, the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) had approximately 11 million members. This number has now fallen to just over 6 million. In terms of membership, the SPD has not fared any better. In the last decade it has decreased by one third.

The “Marx ist muss” conference was held in the midst of the months-long dispute between German train drivers and Deutsche Bahn (DB), the state rail company, which has been supported by the German government and the trade union federation DGB. In the weeks and months before the conference, the train drivers conducted a tenacious struggle against this alliance. In a period of increasing profits and executive salaries, the train drivers have sought to take a stand against declining real wage levels, imposed by DB in alliance with the DGB union Transnet, which is the largest union in the rail system.

Despite a concerted campaign against the drivers by the media, the level of solidarity and support from the population for the strikers has remained very high. Transnet, together with the public service union GDBA, have joined forces with the DGB union federation and campaigned against the strike, supporting DB against the striking workers.

The Left Party refrained from making any clear statement on the train drivers strike during the conference, but its attitude became evident nevertheless. Only one state branch of the organisation, in North Rhine-Westphalia, passed a resolution in support of the train drivers. All other branches rejected similar resolutions, under pressure from the trade union representatives within the party. The Marx21 group expressed their solidarity with the position that was adopted a few weeks later by the Left Party leaders Gregor Gysi, Bodo Ramelow and others—against the demands of the train drivers.

At the conference, Michael Kretschmann from the train drivers’ union, the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Lokführer), and Volkhard Mosler, the long-time leader of the Marx21/Linksruck group, spoke on the strike at the only meeting held on the subject.

In Mosler’s remarks on the train drivers dispute, he avoided making any reference to the strike-breaking role played by Transnet and the GDBA. Instead, he criticised GDL for breaking the “unity” of the unions and accused it of heightening the “vulnerability” of Deutsche Bahn employees.

Mosler concluded with the line of argument used by the DGB union federation and defended the latter’s attacks on the train drivers. He more than once demanded that drivers return to the fold of the DGB and merge with Transnet and the GDBA to form a single union. Such a proposal means nothing more, however, than the defeat of the strike, which was

itself only possible after the GDL quit its contract agreement with Transnet.

Mosler explicitly defended Transnet against opposition voices in the audience. "Transnet deserves to be supported," he declared. "In the final analysis," he continued, "Transnet is also opposed to the privatisation of Deutsche Bahn and is a very, very strong union."

Mosler's first claim is an outright lie. Transnet supports the privatisation of DB and actually finds itself in a minority within the DGB on this question. As for its strength, this can be judged by its own figures, which show that in 2004-2005 some 23,377 members left the union.

The loss of membership is the direct result of Transnet's collaboration with DB management in forcing through one attack after the other. The ZDF television channel's consumer affairs program Frontal21 recently revealed that the decrease in Transnet's income as a result of falling membership dues has been covered by payments from Deutsche Bahn, making Transnet a union directly subsidized by the employer.

After criticising the train drivers for their break from Transnet, Mosler went further and explicitly took the side of Transnet. The lip service he paid later in his speech to solidarity with the striking workers can be explained by the fact that the last rows in the hall were filled with angry train drivers.

In the course of other meetings held at the conference on the question of the trade unions, there was no discussion of the consequences of the disastrous policies of the unions over the past two decades. There was an absence of discussion not only on the train drivers strike, but also on the experiences of Deutsche Telekom workers, the doctors strike, and the wildcat strikes at Opel, where Verdi, the public sector union, and IG Metall, the main industrial union, both campaigned against the workers. Instead, the union bureaucrats in attendance patted each other on the back and prattled on about "social power relations" and "union militancy."

Sybille Stamm spoke at a forum entitled "How to End the Defensive Position of the Unions." Stamm is a leading member of Verdi in the state of Baden Württemberg. Detlef Baade from Verdi in Hamburg also spoke. They did not say one word about the fall in real wages of German workers, the role of the unions in job cuts, or the general worsening of working conditions.

In typical bureaucratic fashion, responsibility for the treachery of the unions was placed on the workers themselves. According to their argument, the unions were less able to take action because of declining membership. The unions needed "more support and a greater commitment from the population." In light of the open strike-breaking role of the DGB against the train drivers, such statements are not only preposterous, they are politically criminal.

The second central theme of the conference was the policies of the Left Party itself. As the conference was itself organised and financed by the Left Party, the organisers sought to exclude all serious analysis of its political role. Instead, the speeches focussed on various tactics and initiatives and the possibilities for propaganda. During these discussions it became clear just how far to the right the Marx21 group has moved inside the Left Party.

Although some speakers rejected the proposal of the Left Party for participating in government, they voiced no principled objection, but rather based their arguments on the tactical premise that the party could win more votes and support by remaining out of office. The talk entitled "Is an SPD/Left Party Government the Best for Berlin?" was typical in this respect.

Anyone expecting to hear a balance sheet of the Left Party's participation in the Berlin state government with the SPD over the last six years was disappointed. The speaker, Klaus-Dieter Heiser, spoke solely about a survey concerning the views of Left Party members in one area of Berlin regarding government participation.

The Left Party and its forerunners have been part of a coalition

government with the SPD in the German capital since 2001. The Berlin Senate has over this period carried out an unprecedented program of cost-cutting. At the same time that the state government was reducing company taxes and bailing out a bank to the tune of billions of euros, it was cutting educational funding, axing tens of thousands of public service jobs, and slashing wages for the remaining workers by up to 10 percent. It was also increasing police powers.

The speakers viewed all developments entirely through the prism of party tactics. Whether in relation to Rifondazione in Italy, the official "left" parties in France, or the Left Party in Berlin—all of the lectures criticised participation in government as a tactical error. None of them suggested that these organisations stood firmly in the camp of the ruling class and shared responsibility for massive attacks against the working population.

Behind this avoidance is the fact that Marx21 itself stands for collaboration between the Left Party and the SPD. At one forum, entitled "How Left is the SPD?" the chief editor of the Marx21 magazine, Stefan Bornost, and Michael Schlecht from the national committee of the Left Party both spoke. Schlecht had long been a member of the SPD, having joined in 1982, and is currently the secretary of Verdi and responsible for its economic policy. In 2005, he defected from the SPD to the Election Alternative for Employment and Social Justice (WASG) group, which later merged together with the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) to form the Left Party.

Bornost and Schlecht argued for cooperation with the SPD. They demanded a common campaign be waged with the SPD for a minimum wage. They said that the Left Party had to prevent the SPD from championing this issue by itself. A Marx21 member commented that talk of a common campaign with the SPD was not just propaganda, but "we really mean to work together on it."

It quickly became clear that the entire discussion, whatever the supposed differences, boiled down to participating in government with the SPD. Schlecht's answer to a question from the audience was unequivocal: The party should first obtain the trust of the voters and then help the SPD into office with a parliamentary majority.

"I have absolutely no interest in this discussion about participating in government, because the Left Party still has too little influence in the electorate," said Schlecht. "The aim of the federal elections in 2009 must be to obtain 18 percent or more of the vote. Then we can talk about a coalition." For the present, the party had to be built further, he insisted, winning wider support and turning the organization into a "party of participation" in which "people have fun."

The few who were critical of Schlecht's perspective merely raised tactical differences. They centred on the question of how the less prominent members of the party could be utilised. Marx21 confronts the same dilemma as that of the sinking ship of the trade union bureaucracy to which it is throwing a life raft: How can workers continue to be controlled with a political perspective that has long since lost any objective basis?

This dilemma was a central feature of the conference. From the title "Marx is a must" to the conference forums, which included an assessment of the Russian Revolution, the significance of Rosa Luxemburg, and the crisis of Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista) in Italy, the Marx21 group of the Left Party attempted to paint itself in left-wing colours and look for support within the universities, in particular.

However, not a single one of these subjects was treated seriously. Instead, the discussion always came back to questions of trade union tactics and political agitation. In keeping with its crude attempts to give the Left Party a radical gloss, Marx21 is organically antagonistic to a genuine Marxist analysis.

This was demonstrated, in particular, by the lectures on history. Whether on the People's Front in China, the history of the German Communist Party, Rosa Luxemburg or the October Revolution, the speakers remained

at an utterly superficial level. There was no serious attempt at a concrete examination of these events, their place in history and the drawing of political lessons. Instead, a series of incoherent quotes and superficial analogies were served up to cover for the various tactics of the unions and the opportunistic manoeuvres of the Marx21 group.

To maintain that such a conference has anything to do with Marx or Marxism is frankly absurd. It was a vain attempt to conceal the logic of the opportunist politics of the Left Party and Marx21, which are moving relentlessly to the right.



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