German Left Party holds its first congress

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31 May 2008

Over the weekend of May 24-25, the Left Party held its first-ever congress in the east German town of Cottbus. The Left Party emerged in June 2007 from a merger of the east German-based Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the west German Election Alternative (WASG).

In less than a year, the Left Party has been able to establish itself as the third biggest party in Germany with representation in four west German state parliaments. Opinion polls rate support for the party at around 13 percent of the electorate. In addition to increased representation at a state level, there is now growing speculation that the Left Party is being groomed for a role in a future federal government. In some states, the party already has its eyes on the leading post of prime minister. In Berlin, the party currently shares power in the Senate with the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The Left Party congress had two tasks: Firstly, it was important for the party to demonstrate that its track record of reliability in government remain unchallenged. Secondly, the party leadership wanted to ensure that no debate was held over the glaring contradictions between the party's left-wing rhetoric and its right-wing practice in government.

Both the conduct of the congress and the opportunism of the party's so-called "left" wing ensured that none of the topics that had been so vigorously debated in the run-up to the congress were publicly aired in Cottbus.

The agenda of the meeting was so densely packed that ordinary delegates barely had a chance to express themselves. At the same time, the three leading figures in the party—Lothar Bisky, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi—were able to speak at length. Half of the congress was spent electing the party's executive committee and other bodies, and following a drawn-out debate on the agenda and congress procedures, the conference proper could only begin after a two-hour delay.

The executive director of the Left Party, Dietmar Bartsch, demonstrated his lack of concern over the delay and was obviously pleased with the way the congress was proceeding. Such teething problems, he said, should be expected in a newly formed party. However, the delays and lack of time meant that any discussion on the most politically controversial portion of the agenda—a general debate over the main motion put forward by the executive committee—was reduced to a minimum. The list of speakers was reduced to a third of those who had registered, and the time allotted per speaker was restricted to three minutes. A total of just 20 delegates had a chance to speak.

This was despite the fact that other potentially explosive topics were also on the agenda. In addition, this was the first opportunity for delegates from west Germany, who are considered to constitute the "leftist" wing in the party, to debate against the majority of the party that originates from the post-Stalinist PDS.

Thus, there was no debate over the future investment programme, which envisaged a sum of €50 billion for social purposes. In connection with this proposal, a leading member of the Left Party and a former minister in the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Helmut Holter, commented that the Left Party should not be regarded merely as a "redistribution" party, and that "socialism also had to be properly financed."

There was also no debate over the proposal made two weeks ago by the Left Party's deputy parliamentary chairman, Wolfgang Neskovic, for a military intervention in Burma to assist with humanitarian aid. Although his proposal flies in the face of the party's anti-militarist stance, nobody at the congress thought his proposal was worth challenging.

Only one delegate—Sahra Wagenknecht of the arch-Stalinist Communist Platform—sought to indirectly criticise party leader Gregor Gysi for his recent efforts to pledge the Left Party to unconditional support for Israel and the German state. Wagenknecht's veiled criticism was sufficient, however, to impel the next speaker, Stefan Liebich, a leading member of the Left Party in Berlin, to expressly thank Gysi for his speech on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. Liebich is one of the founders of the right-wing Forum of Democratic Socialists in the Left Party.

In particular, no mention was made of the activities of the Berlin branch of the party, which has been active in carrying out a wide range of social and welfare cuts during the last seven years as the coalition partner of the SPD. All of the policies passed by the Left Party in Berlin stand in stark contrast to the programmatic positions put forward by the party, and shortly before the congress, leading members of the Left Party in Berlin had sided with the city's finance senator, Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), in a concerted campaign against the city's transport workers.

The two main speakers on the first day, Bisky and Lafontaine, went so far as to praise the party's organisation in Berlin for opposing the latest draft of the European Union constitution—a gesture that counted for little because a political majority in favour of the constitution was guaranteed.

This list of topics ignored by the congress could be extended at length. But the task of the congress was not to debate or clarify issues. More important was to give the impression that the party was united and in a position to be able to channel growing public discontent and deflect it away from the established parties. The main job of the congress was to race through the agenda without

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incurring any lasting damage for the party.

But it took more than skillful party direction to avoid any debate. Another important precondition was the readiness of so-called left currents in the Left Party—the Communist Platform, the Socialist Left, etc.—to remain silent on the salient points. In fact, they all tamely supported the main motion put forward by the executive committee, which was passed by 562 delegates with just 6 voting against it. The motion took the form of an election manifesto consisting of a catalogue of demands and promises. It made no mention of how such demands could be implemented.

In particular, the Communist Platform led by Sahra Wagenknecht fulfilled its role as a left cover for the party's opportunism. Wagenknecht is quite aware that the Left Party is one of the last ports of call for the bourgeoisie before a revolutionary movement of the working class, and she was determined that the party not be rendered incapable of carrying out its duties by internal disputes.

Characteristic in this respect is an interview given by Wagenknecht to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung.* In the interview, she declares that Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine represents an "anti-neo-liberal and anti-capitalist policy." Then when asked why she had withdrawn her candidacy for the post of vice-chairman of the party, she replied: "The reason not to stand was not because I thought I would not get enough votes...the problem was that a minority [!] of ex-PDS functionaries were thoroughly opposed to me."

She continued: "I would have had to hear how my candidacy was a 'declaration of war' and a 'crucial test' for the party. I did not want to subject such a young party at its first congress to such a debate."

Here, the cowardice of the so-called "lefts" in the Left Party is patently clear. The right wing only needs to shout "boo" and the "lefts" run for cover.

Even so, the contradictions simmering in the party did find an expression in the congress. They ignited mainly around the person of Oskar Lafontaine. Contrary to claims made in the press, however, the issue at stake was not the authoritarian or Stalinist style of leadership employed by Lafontaine. Nobody could seriously maintain that the former Party of Democratic Socialism, which has its roots in the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany, could have any problems with an authoritarian style of leadership.

Instead, the tensions emerged around the issue of how to deal with the increasing opposition to the social polarisation of German society and growing poverty.

During the years since German reunification in 1990, the east German regional organisations of the PDS acquired considerable experience in parliamentary and governmental work. As a result, a layer of functionaries developed who are intensely antagonistic to the interests of the working class and have now organised themselves in the faction called the Forum of Democratic Socialists. They have consistently denounced and attacked any struggles against welfare cuts.

In the manner of the Stalinist bureaucracy, they are convinced that the working class needs a firm hand and are determined to quash any independent movement from below. They are equally indifferent to the electoral decisions made by the population as a whole. On this basis, the Berlin regional organisation was prepared to continue its coalition with the SPD despite the fact that the latter party lost half its support in the state elections in 2006. This also explains why the Left Party in Berlin opposed a popular referendum at the start of the year on the issue of the privatisation of the city's water supply.

Lafontaine is conscious of the dangers arising from the broadening rejection of the established parties. He therefore tours the country and makes demagogic speeches attacking the parties involved in Germany's grand coalition government, while ranting against "finance market-driven capitalism." While he seeks to encourage illusions in a "social free-market economy" and the possibility of reforming capitalism, his catalogue of demands aimed at some improvements in the living standards of the working population are enough to make the blood of the right wing in the Left Party run cold.

Lafontaine's strategy of elevating his own profile and that of the Left Party as a whole runs contrary to the bureaucratic routine of his comrades in the east who have been feverishly working for the past 18 years to contain all opposition to the social consequences of capitalist reunification. Lafontaine is aware of the risks of being drawn into government. In his speech in Cottbus, he referred to events in Italy, where a centre-left coalition sank without trace after just two years in power—and to the fate of the French Communist Party, which has also faded into insignificance.

At the same time, Lafontaine is intent on returning to power. His goal is a coalition with the SPD. As the former chairman of the SPD, finance minister and architect of the election victory of the SPD in 1998, he is also aware that the influence of the Left Party could come to an abrupt end if it allows itself to be bought off too quickly, and for too cheap a price. So he is trying to drive up the ante in order to be able to intervene even more effectively when it comes to effectively suppressing a broad popular oppositional movement.

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