

Germany: Hesse Left Party in crisis

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The Left Party has been in severe crisis since the collapse of its policy to support a government coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens in the German state of Hesse.

Throughout the state election campaign in 2008 the Left Party, with its slogan "Koch Has to Go," sought to channel dissatisfied voters behind the SPD and its chairperson, Andrea Ypsilanti. Roland Koch, the conservative minister-president of Hesse, was immensely unpopular at the time of the election.

After the 2008 election, the Left Party proceeded to do everything possible to enable the SPD and the Greens to form a government. The party jettisoned all of the demands with which it ostensibly sought to pressure the SPD to the left and offered its services as a compliant tool for an SPD-Green administration. After the Left Party's plan was stymied by the intervention of the SPD's right wing, which blocked the formation of an SPD-Green coalition in the state, the crisis deepened for the Left Party.

Since the party's election conference last November, dozens of members have turned their back on the party. At the conference, their leading candidate, Willy van Ooyen, reaffirmed the Left Party's support for an SPD government in new elections. Most of those who left thought the Left Party's subordination to the SPD had gone too far. But hardly anyone dares to cite such political issues. Instead, they merely accuse the party leadership of authoritarian measures and greed for power.

On December 31, the local party grouping in Baunatal in northern Hesse more or less disbanded. Some 30 to 35 members announced their resignation. This means that the district organisation in Kassel has lost nearly 40 percent of its membership.

Explaining his own resignation, the chairman of the local group, Bernd Heinicke, declared he didn't want to

continue "being used" to build a "centralist and undemocratic party." He complained, "There is no grassroots democracy, no culture of debate in the Hesse Left Party. Instead, you have elitist cadre formations, secret groups, dossiers about members and mobbing."

His resignation was followed at the beginning of January by that of Pit Metz, who had been a leading candidate for the Left Party in Hesse a year ago until the party leadership forced him to step down. In a letter to the regional executive, Metz described the party as follows: "Envy, mistrust, insinuation of dubious motives, ruthless reaction to supposed or real enemies within the party, ugly slanders, conspiracy theories, creation of dossiers, movement protocols, question catalogues similar to the interrogation of a criminal, dozens of e-mail wars, suggestions to consider a psychotherapist or, in a few cases, a neurologist, threats of suing, spying, lies, the insinuation of lies, personal irresponsibility, unreliability, insults and much more."

At a press conference on January 10, Helge Welker (city parliament member of the Left Party in Rosbach), Peter Ringel (city parliament member in Bad Vibel) and the 25-year-old law student Carina Treutel announced their departure from the party. Welker, saying that twenty to thirty other members would leave the party with them, declared that the party's leading candidate, Willy van Ooyen, "does not care for politics, but only for cash and his career." The parliament members would "walk around in the party and offer a job to every possible person to keep them in power." He lamented that delegates to party conferences are decided centrally by the party leadership.

Criticism of the functioning of the regional party and the federal party is not limited to lower-ranking officials. Charlotte Ullmann of the Left Party's regional executive board, who is considered to represent the party's left wing, recently explained: "Just the election of delegates makes clear who wields power in the party

currently. The factions and their apparatuses voted themselves into the delegate offices so they can mutually further their own interests."

The reproaches by critics and those departing the party are directly aimed at the party leadership, which they accuse of being centralist and undemocratic. This is no doubt the case, but nobody dares mention the main political issues because the differences between the party leadership and those leaving the party are purely of a tactical nature. The so called left wing of the party has never questioned the party's policies in a principled manner.

If a figure like Pit Metz, who has been a member of the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party) for twenty years, is outspoken against government participation by the Left Party he is not doing so as a matter of principle. He simply fears that the party could discredit itself too quickly and lose its ability to direct growing popular discontent into safe parliamentary canals.

Until his resignation Metz had repeatedly adapted to the course of the leadership. On August 26, 2007, at the founding conference of the Hesse Left Party, he was elected leading candidate against his rival Dieter Hooge, the favoured candidate of the party's federal executive. Just two weeks later Metz was forced to resign as leading candidate by the federal leadership.

At party conferences held in August and October last year critics came forward with several motions and demands to be fulfilled by an SPD-Green coalition, but, in the end, the majority agreed on unconditional toleration of such a coalition.

The party leadership has ruthlessly imposed the policy of toleration of an SPD-Green coalition against the doubts of its membership. At every one of the party's five conferences, high-ranking federal representatives were present to nip opposing views in the bud. Sceptics were brought into line by all possible means. These are the reasons for the claims of undemocratic and centralist structures.

With the intensification of the economic crisis, the party leadership headed by Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi has moved further to the right. It is intent on sabotaging and silencing any popular opposition to the government's response to the crisis.

Lafontaine has explicitly embraced the government's gift of 480 billion euros to the banks. In the federal

parliamentary debate he merely proposed that a small sum be reserved for the population, to preserve the illusion of social justice. "Of course, we need something which gives the population the feeling that we are once again striving for social justice," he said. These words summarize the aim of the Left Party: The population needs to be given the "feeling" of justice, while exactly the opposite policy is implemented in practice.

The party leadership also signalled that dissidents in the party were interfering with its right-wing policy and they would like to get rid of them. Van Ooyen declared, "If ten percent of the members think that an SPD-Green government shouldn't be supported, then you have to let them know that they should leave the party. You can't integrate everyone and every standpoint."

Bodo Ramelow, a member of the federal executive, described the dissidents as the "ten percent of lunatics" who could unfortunately be found in the party. Regional Chairman Ulrich Wilken talked of a "near non-existent minority." He claimed that the party had 750 new members last year and only 70 resignations.

These figures have been questioned by Welker. In his district grouping there are allegedly more than 100 members, but he has actually seen only 20 to 25 of them face to face, he reported. "When our treasurer asked some members to pay their membership fees, these people were dumbfounded to learn that they were members of the Left Party."

The conflicts within the Hesse Left Party will inevitably increase following Sunday's state election. Despite a calamitous result for the SPD, the Left Party was unable to win any additional support. The result is a humiliating slap in the face for the perspective of the Left Party, which sought to benefit from the decline in fortunes of the SPD while at the same time seeking to assist it back into political power.



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