

Germany: Left Party congress shows its support for the EU

Dietmar Henning
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The European Party Congress held by the Left Party last weekend in the German Ruhr district city of Essen expressed its unequivocal backing for the European Union. In so doing, the Left Party was fulfilling a basic condition for its possible participation in government following federal elections due to take place this September.

All of the speakers—including the two chairmen of the party, Lothar Bisky and Oskar Lafontaine—made clear that the party's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty was not linked to any hostility to the EU as such. Bisky, who was elected as the party's leading candidate for the European election in June with over 93 percent of delegates' votes, said: "The Left neither seeks to abolish the European Union, nor return to a situation of exclusive nation states." Lafontaine made similar remarks. "There are no enemies of Europe at this party congress," he said. He is not against the European Union, but seeks rather a "different EU."

Prior to its congress, the Left Party had conducted a vigorous debate over the Lisbon Treaty, which has been drawn up to replace the failed European constitution, which was decisively rejected by French and Dutch voters in popular referendums in 2005.

The Left Party is one of three groups that has lodged a legal complaint against the Lisbon Treaty with the federal Constitutional Court. For their part, two Left Party members who have been European parliament deputies for many years, Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann and André Brie, have openly expressed their support for the Lisbon Treaty. On the basis of their support for the treaty the pair were denied a recommendation by the Left Party executive for nomination on this year's list of the party's European election candidates.

Some media outlets had accused the Left Party of being "hostile to Europe" (FAZ) and representing a "radical" and "system-critical" opposition to the EU (WAZ, *Die Welt*). Both Bisky and Lafontaine went to some length to refute these claims.

The European Union and its enormous bureaucratic apparatus in Brussels unequivocally represent Europe's most

powerful financial and economic interests. In the name of free-market competition, the EU dictates the dismantling of employee rights, has implemented a fundamental redivision of social resources to benefit the wealthy, and defends European great power interests with military means. The work of the EU is dictated by an army of lobbyists in Brussels, and its institutions function virtually free of any democratic control.

The Left Party does not reject the European Union. Instead it is attempting to drape the EU in the mantle of democracy. This is the real content of the party's legal action against the Lisbon Treaty.

Lafontaine demands a popular vote over the treaty, more rights for the European parliament, a European "economic government," as well as minimum standards for taxes and social issues. In addition, he criticizes the fact that the "deployment of military forces by the European Union is not subject to parliamentary caveat."

The Left Party is not alone in raising legal objections to the Lisbon Treaty. Fellow plaintiffs include the right-wing politician Peter Gauweiler (Christian Social Union, CSU) and a group led by Franz Ludwig Graf Stauffenberg (CSU), the son of the man who tried to assassinate Hitler. They are also of the opinion that the treaty is "no longer compatible with the essential structures of a democratic constitutional state" (Stauffenberg). Even the Constitutional Court conceded in its initial hearings that the plaintiffs may be in the right with regard to their appeal.

Lafontaine, who was chairman of the pro-EU Social Democratic Party from 1995 to 1999, has close connections with France. In 2005 when the European Constitution was voted down in two EU nations—despite support from Europe's mainstream political parties—Lafontaine was the only major German political figure who took part in meetings calling for a vote against the constitution.

The European Union is also highly unpopular in many other countries. Wherever the population has had an opportunity to articulate its opinion it has rejected the EU constitution and the Lisbon Treaty. There is also substantial

public opposition to European military interventions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The Left Party wants to create a safety valve for this discontent, while maintaining the European Union. The party fears—together with the trade union bureaucracy—that it will be more difficult to contain and channel public opposition if the dictatorial-type powers of the EU are supplemented by the Lisbon Treaty.

Kaufmann and Brie have complicated the situation for the Left Party with their open support for the Lisbon Treaty. They enjoy substantial support in the party. They both received considerable support from delegates when they stood as candidates, despite lacking any recommendation from the party executive. In particular, the pair can rely on the support of former Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, forerunner of the Left Party) federations, which are active in East German municipalities and receive financial subsidies from Brussels.

Kaufmann first joined the SED (Socialist Unity Party—the ruling Stalinist Party in former East Germany and forerunner of the PDS) and was one of the leading candidates of the PDS in the European elections in 1994, 1999 and 2004. She personally participated in the elaboration of the Lisbon Treaty (receiving the Order of Merit for her services) and voted for the treaty in the European Parliament.

Brie has been a member of the SED since 1970 and was a leading member of the PDS, regarded by many as one of the party's "chief ideologues." He has held posts in the party as election campaign manager, member of the party's founding principles commission and deputy party chairman. Like Kaufmann, he has sat in the European parliament since 1999, currently as a member of its committee for foreign affairs, common security, defense and human rights. Contrary to the official party line he also supports the current German army deployment in Afghanistan.

These two so-called "realist politicians" drew the only logical conclusion from the support for the European Union by the Left Party: if one supports the EU in principle, then one must work for the realization of its goals within its committees. Kaufmann and Brie have done precisely that during the past few years.

At the party congress, Chairman Bisky expressly thanked Kaufmann for her "commitment" in the European parliament. The Lisbon Treaty, according to Bisky, also represents a step forward. It "extended the rights of the European parliament and national parliaments, introduced another form of voting in the Council, and anchored commitment for the EU charter of principles and first steps for a participatory democracy." This is very far removed from any fundamental opposition to the EU treaties.

With broad support for Kaufmann and Brie in East

German federations, Lafontaine argued in mealy-mouthed fashion against the pair by appealing to party members to respect the balance between candidates from the east and west of the country.

"The lists have a meaning because they will further promote our growing together," Lafontaine explained before the vote. "Therefore we have tried to achieve a balance between east and west and between women and men. It would not be good if additional candidates from the east exclude western candidates from the list. Please do not permit that, it is just about: east against east or west against west, nothing else."

So far the SPD has justified its refusal to contemplate a coalition at the federal level with the Left Party on the basis of the latter's foreign policy and its rejection of international missions by the German army. The relatively high level of support for Kaufmann and Brie demonstrates that should the Left Party have an opportunity to enter government, it would rapidly align itself with the existing pro-EU course of the German government and establishment.

The party's opposition to militarism is also merely another card in the hand of its leadership to be played in the course of future coalition negotiations. That is clear even to conservative commentators. Last Saturday the online edition of the FAZ newspaper wrote: "The demand for a withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan remains a central position for the Left Party—at least up until the federal election in September."



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