

The German Left Party prepares to head off social protests

Sahra Wagenknecht—"Left" rhetoric cloaks right-wing politics

Dietmar Henning
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On Friday, March 6, the German Left Party held a meeting at the town hall in the city of Bielefeld. The main speaker at the meeting, entitled "The Great Plundering," was Sahra Wagenknecht.

Wagenknecht joined the Stalinist ruling party—the Socialist Unity Party (SED)—in 1989, shortly before the collapse of the East German regime. Since then, she has played a leading role in the successor party of the SED, the Party of Democratic Socialism, which a few years ago fused with a west German social democratic and trade union organisation to become the Left Party. Wagenknecht has represented the PDS-Left Party in the European parliament for the past five years and is a member of the Left Party's executive committee.

As the leading spokeswoman of the so-called "Communist Platform," a faction of hardened Stalinists within the Left Party, Wagenknecht has consistently sought to cover up the pro-capitalist politics of her party with left-sounding rhetoric.

Wagenknecht's remarks in Bielefeld made clear that her own political orientation differs from that of the Left Party leadership only in nuances and her choice of words. After an introduction by the local Left Party chairperson, Barbara Schmidt, who briefly described the effects of the international financial and economic crisis on Bielefeld, Wagenknecht took the floor.

Wagenknecht outlined the development of the financial and economic crisis, criticised the redivision of wealth by the government and "neo-liberals" in Germany and said those who profited from the past upswing—the big companies, banks and the wealthy—continued to benefit from the crisis. The losers during the upswing are the same people who are losing now, she said, referring to ordinary workers, pensioners and, above all, the unemployed, whose living standards have worsened considerably.

Wagenknecht attacked the German government's 500 billion bailout package for the banks, saying, "Formerly we were told that there was no money available for social projects." Governments had repeatedly accused the PDS of making demands, which could not be financed...."even though we never

dared to raise the demand for the sum of 500 billion for educational and social needs."

In her presentation, Wagenknecht neglected to mention that the government's rescue programme for the banks has won the express support of the chairman of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, and was voted for by the party's parliamentary group in the Bundestag.

Wagenknecht did not call on the working class to fight for its independent interests. Instead, she aimed her appeals to those profiting from the current crisis, saying they should make their own positive contribution to society. To this end, she suggested a number of measures, including a tax for millionaires and on stock exchange transactions, as well as increased tax rates for big businesses and an inheritance tax—all demands that have been raised by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Those banks that fail should be transformed "into public institutions," she said, making it clear, however, that this and other demands were aimed at the reform, not the abolishing, of the capitalist system.

"The bank system must be re-directed to its original business of granting credit," she declared. "Investment banking, trade in derivatives and worthless shares must be forbidden" because there is no "economic sense and purpose" in investment banking.

Although Wagenknecht stated that the Left Party was anti-capitalist and aimed to establish another form of economic system, she did not specify what sort of system she had in mind. Instead, she hid behind the ambiguous formulation, "We must think in principle about alternatives to capitalism." Not once did she mention the word "socialism." This omission was not accidental.

Her alternative was a more humane form of capitalism, which in fact corresponds with the social reformist and Keynesian type policies advocated by Lafontaine. There is also a marked similarity between the policies proposed by Wagenknecht and those put forward by the "New Anti-capitalist Party" (NPA) headed by Olivier Besancenot in France. One declares oneself to be "anti-capitalist," but this utterly vague conception has nothing to do with building a political movement of the

working class to replace capitalism with socialism. Instead, it is a cover for the regroupment of various Stalinists, ex-radicals and political opportunists to prop up the discredited reformist parties and trade union bureaucracies.

The rejection of a socialist perspective at the Bielefeld meeting was clear on a number of other issues. Wagenknecht spoke about the connection between the struggle inside and outside parliament. Elections are important, she said, "but even more important is what takes place outside parliament. We have to bring the resistance onto the streets." Any success in parliament is dependent on the right level of protests on the streets. Demonstrations, according to Wagenknecht, have to be organised to put pressure on parliamentary deputies.

This has nothing in common with a genuine socialist perspective, which consists of mobilising the working class as an independent political force. Marxists have always stressed that the future of society is not decided by parliamentary majorities, but in the living struggle of social classes. In this respect, the conscious political break by the working class with all social reformist parties and the trade unions is of crucial importance.

It is on this issue that the Stalinist tradition of the "Communist Platform" headed by Sahra Wagenknecht becomes abundantly clear. The role of the SED, of which she was a member 20 years earlier, was precisely to suppress and crush any independent, socialist development in the working class.

The lessons of Berlin

After her remarks, this reporter asked Wagenknecht how she reconciled her statements with the political reality in Berlin where the Left Party and the SPD have held power in the city government for nearly eight years and carried out precisely the policies that she criticised at the meeting. I noted that the first official act of the PDS after joining the government in 2001 was to agree a law to bail out the insolvent Berlin Banking Company to the tune of €21.6 billion.

I continued, "In the same coalition treaty, the PDS agreed to the slashing of 15,000 public service jobs. In January 2003, the state of Berlin withdrew from the local employers' association in order to implement reductions in salary and wages of up to 12 percent, while simultaneously extending work times. In your speech today, you have spoken out against cuts to unemployment benefits, while in Berlin 35,000 one-euro jobs have been created. At the same time, the Berlin Senate has shut down libraries, sport and leisure facilities, increased nursery and day-care center fees, and implemented a series of other educational cuts."

Confident that the audience of the meeting—which was chiefly made up of her political supporters—would not challenge her

answer, Wagenknecht responded by declaring, "I do not want to mention all the good things undertaken in Berlin in the past years, such as the abolition of the mounted police, etc. In essence, one must say: neo-liberal policies have been carried out in Berlin, and that is not permissible for lefts."

She then claimed that it was not the Left Party that was responsible for the situation in Berlin but rather the PDS—although Wagenknecht was forced to acknowledge that the PDS was also her party of choice before it transformed itself into the Left Party. She "always had problems" with the policy in Berlin, was her final lame response.

In fact, Berlin is not an individual case. In all those states and communities where the Left Party exercises government responsibility, it has implemented precisely the same antisocial and undemocratic measures that it criticises in its election programmes. For Wagenknecht, it was more important that the party had, "formulated the minimum requirements for participation in a left government."

The event clarified the real purpose of the Left Party. Its main function is to stymie any left-wing development of the working class and create new illusions in the possibilities of reforming capitalism. The party's aim is not to create a socialist society, but rather to attempt to patch up the capitalist system. It is an assembly point for disenchanted social democrats, Stalinists, trade unionists, and former petit bourgeois radicals who are vehemently opposed to an independent development of the working population. The role of Sahra Wagenknecht is to provide the appropriate "left" rhetoric for her party's right-wing politics and perspective.



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