

The German Left Party loses support and two prominent members

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As the international economic crisis deepens, the contradictions and divisions within Germany's Left Party are taking an increasingly open form. The party is no longer able to maintain its balancing act between radical phrase-mongering and right-wing political practice and now threatens to fall apart.

At the beginning of May, the budgetary expert of the Left Party faction in the Berlin Senate, Carl Wechselberg, resigned from his post to protest what he described as the growing radicalization of the federal Left Party. After some hesitation he also announced his resignation from the party.

One day later, the European Union deputy of the Left Party, Sylvia Yvonne Kaufmann, announced her resignation and her entry into the Social Democratic Party, because—in her words—the Left Party had elevated “ideology over reason” and was resisting any serious measures to make Europe more democratic. Both politicians were long-time and influential members of the Left Party and belonged to its right wing.

Carl Wechselberg had founded the “Left List/Party of Democratic Socialism” in 1991 in Bremen, and worked for the PDS in the Berlin Senate since 2000 following the completion of his political science degree. In 2003 Wechselberg became a senate deputy. He was ranked among the closer circle of the party's “realo (realistic) politicians” led by the Senate's economic senator and leading Left Party member, Harald Wolf.

As budgetary spokesmen for the Left Party faction in Berlin, Wechselberg is directly linked to the right-wing policies of the Left Party-SPD coalition in the Senate, which has carried out a series of drastic cuts in Berlin over the last seven years. In close collaboration with leading public service trade unions, the Berlin Senate has reorganized its budget at record speed through a combination of cuts and savings measures at the expense of the city's inhabitants. No other German state has experienced such a broad swathe of attacks on living standards in recent history.

After seven years of the SPD-Left Party Senate, Berlin has the highest percentage of one-euro jobbers based on total population. The percentage of those in Berlin dependent on miserly Hartz IV welfare payments is nearly twice as high as

the national average—the same ratio applies to the level of unemployment. Berlin also has the highest ratio of full-time and self-employed workers, who are dependant on supplementary welfare payments because their earnings are inadequate. A quarter of all those employed in Berlin earn less than €900 per month and one third of all children live in poverty—this at a time when social welfare provisions in the city are also being undermined by the Senate.

Sylvia Yvonne Kaufmann had joined the East German ruling Stalinist party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), in 1976. She stayed in the party following the capitalist reunification of Germany in 1989-90 when the SED was renamed the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). From 1991 to 2002 she sat on the PDS's executive committee and was responsible for the party's peace, international and European policies. From 1993 to 2000 Kaufmann was deputy chairman of the party and was the leading PDS candidate in the European elections of 1994, 1999 and 2004. She was unable to win the backing of the party for this year's European election because of her unstinting support for the EU's Lisbon Treaty.

In justifying their resignations from the Left Party, both Wechselberg and Kaufmann put forward basically the same argument.

In a contribution to *Spiegel Online*, Wechselberg accuses the party of being merely a party of protest that is doomed to play a secondary role in political life. He accuses the federal party of a “sectarian and populist attitude,” which lacks any perspective of winning a majority. The SPD is demonized as the Left Party's main enemy, instead of being regarded as its best ally.

Wechselberg accuses the chairman of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, of agitating in an irresponsible manner for a general strike in the anticipation of social conflicts. Lafontaine—a former leader of the SPD—had failed to bring any “capable people from social-democracy” into the party, but instead had encouraged all the “left-wing sectarians on offer in the west of the country, and numerous old union officials,” to enter the Left Party.

With maximum demands like “Hartz IV has to go,” “NATO must be dissolved,” “expropriate the rich,” etc., the Left Party has positioned itself on the ultra-left and thereby deprives itself of the ability to enter into political alliances, according to

Wechselberg. The Left Party had to clear its ranks of such sectarians and remold its political line within the space of months to restore any credibility.

In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Kaufmann accuses the Left Party leadership, with “Lafontaine out in front,” of failing to develop a clear identity. The party has driven itself into isolation in the sphere of European politics and reform-oriented forces have been reduced to a minority. The party has missed the chance to develop into a “modern, libertarian and emancipatory left.”

Kaufmann goes on to claim that the Left Party puts forward “super radical” demands and sees as positive its failure to establish links with other political parties. The party celebrates its own isolation, but in fact one can only change society if one is ready to compromise.

It should be noted that Wechselberg and Kaufmann have simultaneously gone public with their attacks on the Left Party precisely at a time when the party is in fact shifting markedly to the right.

In the German parliament (Bundestag), Left Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine expressly supported the German government’s bank rescue package, arguing it was necessary “to ensure that the financial market system... was put on its feet again as quickly as possible.”

The Left Party has also ditched any demands for the abolition of the Hartz IV payments in favor of a demand for a paltry increase—thereby implicitly accepting the framework of the Hartz legislation. The party favors a scheme of employee participation for companies threatened with bankruptcy. Workers should invest their own wages in their companies in order to achieve a participation of up to 49 percent, i.e., leaving a majority holding in the company in the hands of shareholders and private capital.

In its recent European election program the Left Party clearly identifies with the European Union and its institutions, which have played a leading role for years in attacking the working conditions and living standards of the European population. The Left Party has supplemented the demand for the dissolution of NATO with the call for an alternative military alliance—a “collective security system” with the participation of Russia. With a public declaration of solidarity for the Israeli aggression in Gaza by a number of its leading members, the left party has adapted to an important cornerstone of German foreign policy.

At first sight it may appear paradoxical that prominent representatives of the right wing of the Left Party are quitting as the organization turns further to the right. The explanation can be found in the growing economic crisis and associated social tensions, which have stripped away the basis for the party’s previous policy and plunged it into crisis.

Until now Left Party leaders Oscar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi saw their task in heading off growing social discontent by encouraging the illusion that it was possible to return to a policy of social reform. Following the bank rescue packages,

the introduction of widespread short-time working and mass unemployment this perspective has lost any credibility. Virtually no one believes today that one could remedy the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s through the investment of a few additional billions.

It is notable that according to opinion polls the Left Party is losing support—despite the crisis. For the first time since its official establishment in June 2007 the party has ratings of under 10 percent. Last year it had maintained a support level of an average 14 percent.

Wechselberg and Kaufmann are convinced that this is precisely the time for the Left Party to junk its populist rhetoric and line up unreservedly behind the existing order. They regard any attempt to appeal at this juncture to leftist tendencies in the population as highly dangerous. The Left Party should make clear it sees no alternative to capitalism and make sure that the population is not tempted into thinking otherwise.

In fact, their differences with the party leadership are of a purely tactical nature. Lafontaine and Gysi are also striving to establish a government alliance with the SPD and the Greens and are doing everything they can to assure the ruling class of their reliability. For the Left Party leadership however, now is not the time to ditch their leftist rhetoric. In their opinion, such a step would further undermine the influence of the Left Party and open the door to a genuine socialist opposition.

Both standpoints—on the one hand Wechselberg and Kaufmann, on the other Lafontaine and Gysi—are united in their deeply seated fear of an independent political movement of the working class capable of challenging the free-market system. Preventing such a movement remains the most important task of the Left Party.



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