Germany's Left Party and the European elections

Lucas Adler
13 June 2009

Germany's Left Party was patently unable to profit from the decline in support for social democracy in the European election held last Sunday. The party had hoped for a double-digit result, but in fact polled 7.5 percent and landed in last place of all of the parties with representation in the German parliament.

The Left Party received just 1.4 percent more votes than its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), in the European election five years ago. It thereby failed to meet its proclaimed target of at least 10 percent. In absolute votes, its total amounted to around 390,000 new voters. Notable is the fact that the party only gained fresh support in the western states, while suffering substantial losses in the east of the country. Previously the Left Party had been able to rely on substantial support from the east based on the influence of its predecessor in the region, the post-Stalinist PDS.

In the western states the Left Party won on average between 2 and 4.6 percent of the vote, twice the total gained by the PDS five years previously. In Bavaria and Baden Würtemberg the left Party trebled its vote and obtained six times as many in the small state of Saarland. Saarland (12 percent) and in Hamburg (6.7 percent) were the only states where the Left Party was able to obtain more than 5 percent of the vote.

In all East German states apart from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania the Left Party lost votes compared to 2004, losing a total of 100,000 votes in Berlin, Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. Notably, the Left Party lost votes in those regions where the electorate has had practical experience with the party in power. The party lost influence particularly amongst younger East German voters.

The significance of the election result becomes clearer if one compares the European election with the federal (Bundestag) election of 2005. At that time the PDS and its western partner, the Election Alternative group (WASG)—consisting of various trade union bureaucrats and former SPD functionaries—reacted to increasing protests against the anti-social policies of the Social Democrat-Green Party government by rapidly merging to form the Left Party. In the early parliamentary election the party then received more than 8.7 percent of the vote—1.2 percent more than the total the party received in last week's election.

If one analyses the current election result of the Left Party against this background, then the conclusion is clear: workers, the unemployed and those dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments are increasingly dismissive of this party. Under the conditions of the world economic crisis, the right-wing policy of the party is emerging ever more clearly—despite the party's efforts at left sounding rhetoric. The Left Party supported the government's bank rescue packages and has abandoned any plans to abolish the Hartz IV laws. Together with the trade unions it has worked to prevent action by workers to defend jobs.

In this sense the result of the European election is an expression of the basic dilemma confronting the Left Party. For many decades social democracy was the chief agency in Western Europe for damping down class conflict and securing the bourgeois order based on a policy of social reconciliation. The globalization of the economy has stripped away the foundation for such a policy, and social democracy has responded with a sharp turn to the right.

A group of SPD functionaries, long-standing trade union bureaucrats and former Stalinists reacted to the decline of social-democracy by establishing the Left Party. Their aim was not to draw the lessons from the

© World Socialist Web Site

failure of social-democratic reformism, but rather to prevent an independent movement of the working class by creating illusions that the revival of such a program was possible. This is also the purpose of the leftist rhetoric of party leader Oskar Lafontaine. The political practice of the Left Party in power, however, has revealed its real face.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, the Left Party is following in the footsteps of the SPD and moving further to the right. This cannot take place without internal frictions.

For a number of Left Party functionaries the left rhetoric of the party leadership—in particular its rejection of the Lisbon contract, the replacement for the failed European constitution—goes too far. For this reason the party's former leading European deputy Sylvia Yvonne Kaufmann and two state parliament deputies quit the party shortly before the election.

On the day before the election another former European deputy, André Brie, fiercely attacked the chairman of the party, Lafontaine, in *Der Spiegel*. The latter's authoritarian style and power politics threatened to condemn "the Left Party to political ineffectiveness," Brie declared. The party is dominated by Lafontaine's "subordinates," who use their authority "for their power games and struggles for posts."

For some time Brie has been considered to be a leading "intellectual" in the PDS. He entered the East German Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1969, was an official adviser to the GDR state apparatus and worked as unofficial employee of the state security service, the Stasi. He belongs to the wing of the Left Party that would prefer to dump any sort of radical rhetoric and verbally dissociate the party from socialism.

Lafontaine regards such a position as premature, but he has no fundamental differences with Brie. The entire party leadership reacted with obvious disappointment to the election result, which undermines its perspective of forming a future coalition government at a federal level with the SPD and Greens. With the SPD's 21 percent and the Greens' 12 percent, the three parties were able to gain a combined total of just 40 percent in the European election.

In his statement on the election results, Oskar Lafontaine publicly expressed his disappointment with the poor result notched up by the SPD. He blamed the unemployed, low-income earners and pensioners, who were disenchanted with the institutions of the European Union and did not turn out to vote. They felt themselves to be isolated and reacted with abstention and resignation, Lafontaine declared, and concluded, This is "a clear problem for all of democracy."

Lafontaine could not have more clearly articulated the target group of the Left Party: not workers, the unemployed and pensioners, who have angrily turned their backs on the SPD, but rather the SPD itself, which is losing its electoral base. Brie made the very same point in his interview in *Der Spiegel*: "The fight against the SPD and the Greens, must be turned into a fight to win them."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site