

German Left Party leader promotes reformist politics

Peter Schwarz
25 June 2009

Congresses of the Left Party are usually a dreadful affair. The main concern at such gatherings is to arrive at a compromise resolution capable of satisfying the various currents inside the party—those who like to pose as radicals in order to distinguish themselves from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), as well as those participating or intent on participating in government who are perturbed by slogans sounding too radical. It is a controversy over words without any practical consequences.

This was the state of affairs last weekend at the congress of the German Left Party held in the Max Schmeling Hall in Berlin. As usual, the congress had been preceded by a ferocious verbal exchange between the party wings—a dispute which was intensified by the party's poor showing in the recent European elections. Instead of the expected 10 plus percent, the Left Party won just 7.5 percent

Prior to the conference, no less than 1,400 amendments to the executive committee's draft program were submitted. In the event, a speech by party leader Gregor Gysi was sufficient to draw standing ovations and abruptly end all differences. The program draft was adopted in a virtually unaltered form by an overwhelming majority. Only seven of the 560 delegates voted against and four abstained. The whole preceding dispute had been nothing other than hot air.

In fact, all Gysi had done was to appeal to "party unity," to call for compromises and to ask delegates to talk "with one another and not about one another." Above all, he reminded the delegates that the Left Party was intent on entering government in Saarland, Thuringia and Saxonia, where state elections are due on August 30, and in Brandenburg, where the state election is held on September 27 simultaneously with the federal election. This was sufficient to stifle any debate over the party's program.

The leading candidates of the Left Party in Thuringia and Saarland, Bodo Ramelow and Oskar Lafontaine, have been promoting a government coalition with the Social Democratic Party for some time. In April, Ramelow told the FAZ newspaper: "We want to send the CDU into the wasteland and establish a reform-oriented state government."

At the congress of the Left Party in Saarland, Lafontaine called upon the SPD to profess its willingness to enter a

coalition. There is a broad programmatic overlap between both parties in the sphere of finance, economic and social policies, he said.

In the long term, the Left Party is also intent on establishing co-operation with the SPD on the federal level. Lafontaine made this unmistakably clear in Berlin. "We do not rule out a government cooperation," he stressed. "We do not rule out cooperating to achieve a left majority in the German Bundestag. It is the Social Democratic Party which made the foolish decision not to cooperate with us and thereby tossed its own program into the rubbish bin."

At the moment, however, the Left Party sees little chance of participating in a federal government. In the European election, the combined vote for the Left Party and the SPD was less than 30 percent. The Greens, who for a long time were also considered to be a possible coalition partner of the SPD and the Left Party, are moving ever more closely to the conservative Christian Democrats.

Gysi could therefore declare without fear of contradiction: "All debates over government participation at a federal level are beside the point at this time. None of the other parties is at present a possible coalition partner for us."

For this reason, he could also afford to accept a few demands in the party's federal election program that state and local representatives of the party consider to be an obstacle to successful coalition negotiations with the SPD. These include the introduction of a legal minimum wage of €10, the increase of the Hartz IV welfare payments to €500, an annual stimulus program of €200 billion, the nationalization of banks and energy concerns, the withdrawal of the German army from Afghanistan and the dissolution of NATO. However, the congress in Berlin rejected a number of other demands including the nationalization of key industries, a reduction of the working week to 30 hours and the lowering of the pension age to 60 years.

On closer inspection, the adopted program contains a host of qualifications. The program calls not just for the dissolution of NATO, but for its replacement by a new "collective security system," in which Russia is also involved. The Left Party here merely anticipates a possible breakup of NATO due to increasing transatlantic tensions.

Lafontaine also stressed that his demand for a €10 minimum wage was no challenge to the capitalist order. The Catholic Workers' Movement demands a minimum wage of €9.20 and in Luxembourg and France the legal minimum wage is well in excess of the €7.50 called for by the SPD and the German trade union movement, DGB. "Yes, we have the courage to demand something similar to the measure of Junker and Sarkozy (the Prime Minister of Luxembourg and the French president)," he said.

Anyway, hardly anyone takes the social demands contained in the election program seriously. In all those regions where the Left Party has taken up government responsibility, it has reduced, not increased, welfare benefits and wages. The best example is the German capital of Berlin, which has been governed for the past eight years by a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party. The current demands for a minimum wage and higher Hartz IV payments are merely a crude bait for the electorate and a lever for negotiations over a coalition with the SPD. The Left Party has neither the intention nor the means of implementing such policies in the face of ruling class resistance.

While Gregor Gysi sought to soothe the conscience of the party, Oskar Lafontaine devoted his speech to programmatic issues. He had evidently come to the conclusion that, in the midst of the economic crisis, the Left Party needed some sort of social perspective. To this end he rummaged indiscriminately through history and patched together a program with an eclecticism that takes one's breath away.

In the course of his speech he invoked US president Abraham Lincoln, the entrepreneur and inventor Rudolf Diesel, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the economist Paul Krugman as inspirations for his program. He did not mention the word socialism. Instead, he praised a social model that he termed an "economy of free people." "We want an economy of free people. That is our role model for the future, this is our vision and this is what we are fighting for," he cried out in the hall.

Lafontaine went on to declare that in the economic sphere, freedom applied only to prices, investment activity and trade, but in fact it had to be applied concretely to people. "An economy of free people does without suppression and exploitation. This means that neither nationalization on the one hand nor private ownership of the means of production in its current form on the other hand can be the basis for a genuinely free economic constitution. Only when those employed are themselves shareholders in their enterprises, and when they have a say in factories and administrations, do we open up the door to a really free and social market economy."

So Lafontaine's "economy of free people" boils down to codetermination (the traditional German "Mitbestimmung") in combination with employee stock options. He neither seeks to abolish private property of the means of production nor the capitalist market. There is nothing new or original in his proposals. Lafontaine's program has its origins in the conception of economic democracy developed during the

Weimar Republic by Fritz Naphtali, a staff member of the General German Trade Union Federation (ADGB), and the Social Democratic Finance Minister and economist Rudolf Hilferding. It was aimed at preventing workers from turning to socialism, while encouraging illusions in the capacity of capitalism to reform itself.

In the post-war period, Naphtali's conceptions were very popular in SPD circles. The introduction of "Mitbestimmung" as one of the main planks of German industrial law was largely aimed at countering the widespread demand at the end of the war for the expropriation of major industries. Eventually, within the framework of such participation, the works councils and trade union representatives developed into co-managers, who elevate the interests of the company above that of the workforce and implement wage cuts and dismissals.

Lafontaine's proposal for workers to financially invest in the company they work for only serves to strengthen this tendency. It chains the fate of workers to their "own" company, which is prone to the fluctuations of the capitalist market and international competition. Instead of making workers "free", they are, for better or worse, made entirely dependant on the competitiveness of the company they work for. The consequence is the splitting of the working class and the undermining of any sort of solidarity.

These are the utterly discredited and threadbare policies with which Lafontaine is trying to impress his public. "Our central answer to the economic and financial crisis is workforce participation," he declared at Max Schmeling Hall and called this "solidarity economics." In reality, it is a political dead end.



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