

Why the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany) opposes an SPD-Left Party government

Ulrich Rippert, PSG candidate in German federal election
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The gains registered by the Left Party in state elections held in Saarland and Thuringia last Sunday have stirred up a debate about possible future governmental alliances between the Left Party and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Heribert Prantl, the head of the home affairs department of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, has written a number of articles praising the leader of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine. In Tuesday's edition, Prantl describes Lafontaine as one of the few charismatic politicians in German politics, comparable only to the veteran postwar SPD leader Willy Brandt and the former conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) politician Franz-Josef Strauss. Prantl calls upon the SPD to rein in the "notorious anti-communists" in its ranks and set its sights on collaboration with the Left Party at the federal level.

In *Spiegel-Online*, the Göttingen political scientist Franz Walter describes Lafontaine as one of the few "strategists" in German politics and as the "original leader of the pack amongst the Social Democrats," the only man with "a sense for gradual tectonic changes in society" able to establish left majorities.

Why this glorification of Lafontaine? Because the German ruling elite has concluded that the Left Party is needed to stabilise political relations under conditions of increasing social conflict.

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) is a resolute opponent of an SPD-Left Party coalition, at either the state or federal level. Such a government would not represent a step forward for the working class.

In those regions where the Left Party already holds political power, it unreservedly defends the interests of the business elite. The Left Party has turned the phrase "talk left, act right" into its political credo. The inevitable disillusionment resulting from the right-wing policies of such a "left" government would only play into the hands of extreme right-wing political forces.

One must ask: Who is currently agitating for cooperation between the SPD and the Left Party, and why?

Last Sunday's election result came as something of a shock to the political elite. The big losses recorded by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—losing 13 percent in Saarland and 12 percent in Thuringia—were a clear expression of increasing popular opposition to the policies of the federal government, headed by CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel. They came only a month before national parliamentary elections that will decide the makeup of the next federal government.

The CDU registered major losses despite conducting its national election campaign in a manner designed to conceal to the extent

possible the social implications of the financial crisis and postpone a coming surge in unemployment until after the September 27 vote. With the help of its "cash for clunkers" programme, renewals of short-time work subsidies and various reflationary programmes, combined with an intensive media campaign predicting the end of the economic crisis, the government has sought to give the impression that the crisis has been largely overcome.

If under these conditions popular opposition is making itself felt, what can be expected this autumn when unemployment rises to 5 million and the government begins to implement drastic social cuts in order to repay the billions it has handed out to the banks?

Against this background, politicians and journalists are warning that a future German government consisting of rabid free-market advocates such as Guido Westerwelle, leader of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and Baron von Guttenberg, the current CSU economics minister, would further inflame public opinion and spark social protest. While an SPD-Left Party government is not immediately likely at a federal level, commentators say such a prospect should be taken much more seriously and held in reserve in order to head off and defuse popular discontent and stabilise bourgeois rule.

The current buildup of the Left Party by major newspapers and television news outlets is bound up with the fact that, despite his resignation as federal finance minister in the SPD-Green Party coalition government 10 years ago, Oskar Lafontaine has a well-earned reputation for being a trustworthy bourgeois politician.

The ruling elite knows it has no cause to fear socialist measures from this man. On the contrary, Lafontaine's warnings of deepening social divisions, his attacks on the millions in bonuses for corporate executives who are carrying out wage-cutting, his broadsides against low-paying jobs and pension cutbacks are all designed to encourage illusions in a more humane and socially responsible brand of capitalism.

Lafontaine frequently refers favourably to the CDU economics minister of the 1950s, Ludwig Erhard, who propagated the notion of a "social free-market economy." He cites the German Constitution, which refers to the "social responsibility that is bound up with ownership of property." The aim is to promote illusions in the prospect of social reform in order to oppose a genuine socialist perspective and stabilise bourgeois relations.

Lafontaine is being lauded by sections of the political establishment because he played an important role within this establishment in the past. He was an architect of the SPD-Green government, which, following 17 years of rule by conservative administrations headed by

CDU leader Helmut Kohl, pushed through “reforms” that no conservative regime had dared to implement.

When it came to power in 1998, the SPD-Green government was celebrated as a “left project.” What followed is well known. It pushed through unprecedented attacks on social welfare programmes. The coalition government also played a critical role in overcoming popular opposition to the deployment and expansion of the German military. Within weeks of coming to power, the SPD and the Greens sent troops to the front in Yugoslavia, thereby setting the course for a revival of German militarism.

Lafontaine’s subsequent resignation as finance minister was consistent with his defence of bourgeois order. When the big business federations made unmistakably clear in 1999 that they and they alone were to determine economic policy, Lafontaine backed down and left his post in deference to them.

Today, Lafontaine tries to play down the significance of his resignation at that time, but it established the pattern that was to be followed by the Left Party that he subsequently helped create. Nothing characterises the Left Party more than its capitulation to the interests of the major corporations and banks.

The party has played a leading role in the Senate in Berlin for the past eight years. Under the direction of the SPD-Left Party administration, entire suburbs of Berlin have been turned into ghettos of poverty. A third of all children in the city are dependent on miserly Hartz IV welfare payments, and the wages of public service workers are some 10 percent lower than the national average.

Following the experience in Berlin, anyone who presents an SPD-Left Party government as a “left project” is either politically uninformed or guilty of deliberate deception.

At the start of this year, Lafontaine once again made clear what one is to make of his demagogic speeches against “casino capitalism” and the “dictatorship of market radicalism.” He supported the German government’s €480 billion bank rescue package, declaring there was no alternative.

Instead of demanding that those speculators responsible for precipitating the crisis be held accountable and calling for measures to rein in the banks, Lafontaine endorsed the government’s bailout package at taxpayer expense without batting an eye. Now he seeks to give lectures on morality to the speculators, while declaring that there is “no alternative” to austerity measures directed against the working class to restock the federal treasury.

The buildup of Lafontaine is being aided by trade union bureaucrats and petty-bourgeois political groups that are trying to repackage discredited social democrats such as Lafontaine as genuine socialists.

A typical example is the spokesperson of the SAV (Socialist Alternative), Sascha Stanicic. In an article entitled “The SAV and the Left Party,” Stanicic writes that, despite its “contradictions” and “mistakes,” the Left Party is the only starting point for a gathering of those forces that could develop into a socialist workers’ party.

According to Stanicic, the Left Party is “a contradictory party,” in which different political currents are fighting for influence. “The forces who stand for the implementation of welfare cuts and anti-worker policies in the Berlin Senate and who argue for further government participation with the pro-capitalist SPD,” Stanicic writes, “do not represent the whole party, even if they dominate in the apparatus, parliamentary groups and leadership.”

There are “many thousands of members and millions of voters” who have set their hopes on the party. These, Stanicic writes, “recognise that the political landscape has improved for the working class since

the...entry of the Left Party parliamentary group into the Bundestag [the federal parliament].”

This argument is simply absurd. A party whose apparatus, parliamentary groups and leadership embrace the politics of social cuts and favour government participation with the pro-capitalist SPD is a bourgeois party. The actual policies of such a party, whatever its rhetorical flourishes, are reactionary.

To assert that the entry of the Left Party into the Bundestag has “improved” the “political landscape for the working class” under conditions of soaring unemployment, rampant wage-cutting and growing poverty is a combination of self-delusion and deliberate falsification.

To declare, moreover, that the Left Party is the expression of a leftward development of the working class is to turn reality on its head. The Left Party represents an attempt by the remnants of the Stalinist apparatus of the former East Germany and frustrated social democrats and union officials in the West to set up a bureaucratic instrument to block a political radicalisation and socialist development of the working class.

Developments in Italy demonstrate the falsity and reactionary nature of such a bureaucratic manoeuvre. There, the Refounded Communism party (Rifondazione Comunista—PRC) emerged as a successor to the Stalinist Communist Party and was praised by all Italian radical groupings as a model for a “new left.” In the event, the PRC entered the government of Romano Prodi and provided a left cover for the administration’s right-wing policies. The inevitable popular frustration and disappointment created the conditions, in the absence of a genuine socialist alternative, for Silvio Berlusconi to return to power in an alliance with neo-fascists and racists.

The Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) and the International Committee of the Fourth International are determined to prevent a repetition of such betrayals. The PSG is running its own candidates in this month’s federal elections, in opposition to all of the bourgeois parties, including the Left Party, with the goal of developing a mass independent socialist movement of the working class.



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