

Left Party comes to the aid of German government

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Last week's deadly bombing of dozens of Afghan civilians in Kunduz on the orders of a German commander has provoked a severe crisis for the German government just two weeks before national elections. The government had sought to keep the Afghan war out of the election campaign, but the public uproar over the Kunduz massacre has now made this impossible.

On Tuesday, the parliament (Bundestag) held a special debate on Afghanistan. The governing grand coalition parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—used the occasion to declare their unwavering support for the German military mission in Afghanistan, in general, and for the order given by the German commander in Kunduz, in particular.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of the CDU said she would not tolerate any criticism “at home or abroad” of the activities of German forces in the region. Her comments were echoed by the SPD foreign minister and vice chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who warned against “premature judgments” regarding the conduct of German troops in Afghanistan. The opposition Green Party and Free Democratic Party closed ranks with the government.

On the same day as the Bundestag debate, German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung led an official ceremony to inaugurate a new memorial commemorating German soldiers who died in war. This is the first time since the Nazi atrocities in World War II that a German government has dared erect such a monument.

Thus, the response to the Kunduz massacre of the German government, opposition parties, and the military high command has been to launch a renewed offensive on behalf of German militarism.

Only hours after the Bundestag debate, the Left Party held a rally at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate under the slogan: “Stop the bombing—Get out of Afghanistan.” This slogan, however, was a fraud. The real purpose of the rally was to head off popular opposition to the war and

signal the Left Party's support for German imperialism.

The rally was held on short notice, and the Left Party leadership made no attempt to mobilise popular anti-war sentiment. But while the turnout was small—about 500—reporters and camera teams were plentiful. It was clear that the Left Party had called the rally to provide itself a platform from which it could send a signal to the governing parties and the German ruling class. The message was: We are prepared to support a new strategy for pursuing the war in Afghanistan.

Concerned that developments in Afghanistan could undermine German international interests, the Left Party was offering its advice on a more effective imperialist foreign policy and the means to sell it to the German population.

The main speaker at the rally, party Co-Chairman Oskar Lafontaine, made clear that the Left Party was dropping its previous call for the immediate withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan. He declared that what was needed was a “solution at least comparable to that laid down by the Canadian government,” and added, “We need a date for a complete withdrawal of troops.”

Lafontaine's advocacy of the Canadian policy in Afghanistan echoes none other than US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who recently lauded Canada as the US's closest ally in the country.

In reality, the Canadian government's pledge to remove its troops by 2011 is a cynical maneuver aimed at quelling mass anti-war sentiment and growing demands for an immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops. Nor is there the slightest guarantee that the government will not renege on its promise. It has already extended its presence in Afghanistan on two previous occasions.

Lafontaine proposes that the German government adopt the “Canadian solution” precisely to quiet mounting domestic opposition to the war and enable German troops to remain in Afghanistan.

In his speech, Lafontaine took care to place his criticisms of current official policy in Afghanistan within the framework of patriotic support for the foreign and domestic interests of the German bourgeoisie. He cited leading German military and security officials who have publicly warned that the deployment of the army in Afghanistan has only increased the danger of terror attacks in Germany. “We are not protecting our country,” he declared.

Similar political signals have been sent by other leading members of the Left Party. In an interview with *Junge Welt* on the day of the Berlin rally, the head of the party’s parliamentary fraction, Dagmar Enkelmann, declared that her party was seeking “a broad public discussion of an exit strategy.”

Anyone familiar with the American intervention in Iraq will understand the significance of this term. “Exit strategy” is a political euphemism for keeping troops there indefinitely.

Using the argument that an immediate withdrawal of troops would result in “chaos,” supporters of the Iraq war argued in favour of an “exit strategy.” The “exit strategy” developed by the Obama administration involves the retention of tens of thousands of US regular and irregular troops and the maintenance of permanent military bases in the country.

The colonial occupation of Iraq to secure US imperialist interests continues in a somewhat different form, allowing Washington to concentrate on its preferred war front—Afghanistan and Pakistan.

That the Left Party supports a similar solution for Afghanistan is underscored by Enkelmann’s endorsement in the *Junge Welt* interview of the call made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown for a United Nations conference on Afghanistan, dubbed the “exit strategy summit.”

The purpose of such a conference would not be to end the war in Afghanistan, nor to create conditions for troop withdrawals, but rather to acquire additional international support and the imprimatur of the UN for an illegal and increasingly unpopular war. A UN-sponsored “exit strategy” would likely involve sending more troops to the country.

As the US security think tank Stratfor wrote: “European leaders are considering an exit strategy from Afghanistan that includes a short-term plan to send additional troops to train up Afghans to defend themselves, and a long-term goal of withdrawal by a mutually agreeable date.”

Lafontaine, the Left Party and influential layers of the

German bourgeoisie regard such an “exit strategy conference” as a means of shifting control over the US-led NATO operation towards the European powers—above all, Germany.

Support for a different form of military intervention was expressed by another Left Party leader, Dietmar Bartsch, at a press conference held the day before the Brandenburg Gate rally. Bartsch called for an alternative strategy based on increased civil engagement and more rapid training of local Afghan police by German police officers.

The arguments put forward by Barsch and Enkelmann for an “exit strategy” in Afghanistan—“rebuilding the country,” “concentration on civilian engagement,” “training of local security forces”—eerily recall the reasons given by the Social Democratic Party and the Greens for sending troops to Afghanistan in the first place in 2003.

The Left Party is being feted by influential sections of the German media and bourgeois political circles. As the September 27 date for the federal election approaches, there is a growing choir of voices proclaiming that the Left Party has sufficiently demonstrated its trustworthiness on domestic issues. In particular, it has helped carry out sweeping social cuts in the course of its coalition administration with the SPD in the capital city of Berlin.

To advance towards becoming part of a ruling coalition at the federal level, the Left Party must also prove that it can reliably defend German imperialist interests abroad. It is in this connection that one must view the change in line on Afghanistan being carried out by Lafontaine and the Left Party.

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