Germany: What the selection of Left Party candidates in North Rhine-Westphalia reveals

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The leading personnel of a party often reveal more about its character than pre-election promises, which are quickly forgotten after the vote. In this regard, the recent congress of the Left Party held in Mülheim in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) is instructive.

The congress was held to choose the party's candidates for the state election to be held May 9, 2010. The most prominent candidates on the state list are almost exclusively trade union officials and academics, including a large number of former Social Democratic Party (SPD) members and Greens.

An SPD-Green coalition governed North Rhine-Westphalia from 1995 to 2005. During most of those years, a coalition of the same political forces formed Germany's national government. The latter introduced notoriously discriminatory anti-welfare legislation such as the Hartz laws and "Agenda 2010." For such policies both parties received their comeuppance. In 2005, the SPD in NRW lost the post of prime minister to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) for the first time in 39 years and the Greens only received 6.2 percent of the vote.

Now, some of the functionaries of these parties voted out of office in 2005, together with a number of trade union officials, are attempting to revive their political careers as part of the Left Party, which according to one recent poll (Infratest Dimap), is favored by 8 percent of the electorate. The declared aim of the Left Party is to revive the fortunes of the SPD and the Greens.

The extent to which the Left Party is in the hands of the old party and trade union apparatuses—and not the working class—was highlighted by an incident at the recent congress. Jörg Öberwahrenbrock, an electrical engineer from Hagen and a candidate in the upcoming state election, requested that the party introduce a quota for workers wishing to stand for office. He motivated such a quota by pointing out that of the 61 applicants for the state election list, only eight were workers.

Virtually all the leading candidates, who are more or less guaranteed seats in the state parliament (*Landtag*), are members of the regional party executive.

First on the list is teacher Bärbel Beuermann, a member of the Education and Science union (GEW) who works with the pacifist organisation, the German Peace Society, and the anti-globalisation organisation, ATTAC, as well as with feminists. She joined the Party of Democratic Socialism in 1999 (the successor party to the Socialist Unity Party—the ruling Stalinist party of former East Germany) and quickly rose in the ranks to become its deputy chairman in North Rhine-Westphalia.

The second place on the state list belongs to the 59-year-old chairman of the state party, Wolfgang Zimmermann, a long-standing functionary in the public service union, Verdi. In his function as chairman of the Verdi district Rhine Wupper, and as a member of the Verdi state executive committee, Zimmermann has participated in numerous betrayals of union disputes in NRW. In order to project a more left-wing image, he occasionally publishes articles in the *SoZ* (*Socialist Newspaper*), which has close links to the "left" opportunists of the Pabloite United Secretariat.

In recent months, Zimmermann has vehemently expressed support for a coalition of the Left Party with the SPD and Greens. After the local elections in August of this year, he even endorsed collaboration with the CDU in city governments "if there was enough agreement over content."

Third spot on the list was taken by Carolin Butterwegge in a run-off vote against Edith Fröse, a Verdi union secretary from Duisburg. The 35-year-old

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Butterwegge is a social worker, obtained a doctorate in sociology at the University of Duisburg-Essen on the subject of the "poverty of children with an immigrant background," and since 2008 has worked as an advisor to Rüdiger Sagel, who occupies fourth place on the list.

Sagel is a member of the Verdi union and sat for many years as a Green in the NRW state parliament. An engineering graduate, Sagel was budgetary and finance policy spokesman of the Green parliamentary group in the *Landtag*. In 2003, he joined the Greens' state parliamentary council before quitting the party in 2007 in favour of the Left Party.

Another former Green is Ralf Michalowsky, who occupies place number six. The sociologist is spokesman for the Left Party's regional council. He first joined the SPD in 1970 before switching to the Greens in 1994, and then joining the Election Alternative group in 2004—a forerunner of the Left Party. He is also a member of Verdi.

The remaining candidates have similar pedigrees. At number 10 is Michael Aggelidis, also a member of the Left Party regional council. The 42-year-old attorney writes in his application for candidacy that for nearly 30 years he has been on "the left flank of social-democracy," initially in the SPD, then in the PDS, and now with the Left Party. Like Zimmermann, Aggelidis has his roots in the Pabloite Socialist Alternative (SAV) group.

Some media outlets have drawn attention to factional struggles in the Left Party between the so-called "Socialist Left" (SL) and "Anti-capitalist Left" (AKL) factions. The Socialist Left is described as more moderate and closer to the trade unions than the radical Anti-capitalist Left. In fact, there is little to choose between the two groups. The differences are mainly of a verbal character and to some extent in their social composition. The SL is a haven for trade union officials, while the AKL brings together cynical ex-leftists such as the state chairman Zimmermann.

Both wings seek to support a government headed by the SPD and spread the illusion that it is possible to pressure the SPD and Greens to act on behalf of workers.

The SL commented on the electoral fiasco for the SPD in the recent federal election as follows: "We do not feel any joy over the catastrophic defeat for the SPD.… The Left Party must and will in future apply political pressure from the left so that the SPD finally draws the correct consequences about its worst defeat at the polls in its history."

The AKL formulates it somewhat more reservedly: "There will be no blank cheque by the Left Party in case of the election of a social-democratic prime minister [in North Rhine-Westphalia]. But we will not stand in the way of a change, because we are ready to tolerate a SPD-Green government to stop the conservatives." At the same time, the AKL calls on the SPD and Greens to mobilise the population against the very same policies those two parties implemented when in power.

The statements by the two groups reveal the role of the Left Party—to divert social anger and protest into channels harmless to the ruling elite. To its founding conference the "Socialist Left" invited no less than the honourary chairman of the Left Party, Hans Modrow. Modrow had a long career inside the East German Stalinist Socialist Unity Party and was the head of the GDR (East German) government from November 1989 to April 1990.

In his memoirs, Modrow proudly boasts about his role in guaranteeing law and order on German streets to make possible the country's capitalist reunification. His main task in 1990, he wrote, was to "prevent chaos and ensure the country remained governable." This same credo could be applied to the motley crew of social democrats and union officials assembled in the Left Party.

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