

# What is behind the power struggle in the German Left Party?

Lucas Adler  
18 January 2010

An open power struggle has broken out in the German Left Party between its chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, and its national secretary, Dietmar Bartsch. Under increasing pressure from the Lafontaine faction in the party, Bartsch resigned his post last Friday.

On January 5, *Spiegel Online* reported on a letter addressed to the chairman of the Left Party parliamentary (Bundestag) faction, Gregor Gysi, in which the regional chairmen of the Left Party in the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg expressed sharp criticisms of Bartsch and demanded his resignation. The key reproach against Bartsch was that he spread rumors over the private life of Lafontaine and opened up a debate about a possible successor to the party chairman, after the latter announced he would be withdrawing briefly from political activity due to a cancer condition.

The controversy then escalated. Circles close to Lafontaine report that he regarded his relationship with Bartsch to have been irreparably damaged and he would stand as a candidate for the chairmanship of the party this May only if Bartsch resigned his post. Now Bartsch is gone.

For his part, Bartsch denied that there was any power struggle or rivalry between himself and Lafontaine.

On January 11, Gysi lined up against Bartsch. At a meeting of some 700 party members from various legislative bodies and regional organizations, the chairman of the Left Party Bundestag faction deplored the “intolerable climate of denunciation” that prevailed in the party and accused Bartsch of disloyalty. One week before, Gysi had met with Lafontaine in the latter’s state constituency of Saarland, and the two men had presumably agreed on the content of the comments made by Gysi on January 11.

There then followed a torrent of protests from the East German regional organizations. The deputy regional chairman of Saxony-Anhalt, Birke Bull, told *Spiegel Online* that Gysi was delivering Bartsch a “step by step KO blow.” He added, “Apparently, broad layers of the party who support Bartsch and his pragmatic politics are not being taken seriously. I find that extremely regrettable.”

The Left Party regional chairman for the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Steffen Bockhahn, expressed his support for a renewed candidacy by Bartsch. “I want to do all that I can to ensure that he stands again,” he said.

His colleague from the state of Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow, regretted that the criticism of Bartsch had not taken place behind closed doors and declared it was unacceptable when the impression was given publicly that “someone is being stabbed in the back.”

The deputy chairman of the party, Halina Wawzyniak, said that Gysi’s accusation of disloyalty was “fictitious” and demanded an immediate meeting of the party executive.

The conflicts now assuming an open form in the Left Party have their roots in the foundations of the organization.

The policies of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green government (1998-2004)—including the biggest welfare cuts in the history of the federal republic, the creation of a huge low-wage sector and the re-militarisation of German foreign policy—enormously deepened the gulf between Social Democracy and its traditional supporters within the working class. Since being voted out of office, the SPD in recent elections has lost over 10 million votes across the country, i.e., more than half of its electoral support. In the same period, about 250,000 members quit the SPD.

This stripped the ruling elite of its most important political instrument for containing the class struggle. Due to its longstanding links to the working class, the SPD had been the most important prop of the bourgeois order in the post-war period.

The creation of the Left Party was a response by more farsighted layers of the ruling class to this development. With the SPD losing any means of controlling the working class, a new party became necessary in order to take over this function.

The key player in the foundation of the Left Party was Lafontaine, who, as SPD chairman, had organized the SPD’s election victory in 1998. Lafontaine, having broken with his former party, based his new project on the remnants

of the Stalinist and Social Democratic bureaucracies: the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism in the east, and disillusioned trade union and former SPD functionaries in the west who had set up a group called Election Alternative (WASG).

The Left Party promoted the illusion that it was possible to return to the type of social reform policies that prevailed during the 1960s and 1970s, without examining why this form of politics had collapsed so dramatically, reflected above all in the waning influence of the SPD. All those involved in the founding of the Left Party were agreed that this stone be left unturned. At the same time, there were underlying fissures in the party from the outset.

In the west of the country, the party was impelled to adopt a certain leftist rhetoric in order to distinguish itself, at least verbally, from the SPD. In the east, the Left Party, in the form of its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism, had played an active role in government at various levels for many years, collaborating with the SPD in social attacks on the working class and demonstrating that it could be counted on as a reliable prop of the bourgeois order.

The growth of social tensions in Germany has exacerbated the fissures and frictions within the Left Party. In response to the growing radicalization of layers of workers, Lafontaine has been forced to strike more radical poses in order to posture as a left alternative to the SPD. His stance has met with opposition from the regional organizations of the party in the east because it threatens their ongoing political alliances with older and more traditional bourgeois parties.

Bartsch embodied this opposition in the Left Party. For years he had led the way in encouraging alliances between the Left Party and the SPD at the state level, and was prepared to immediately form a coalition with the SPD at the federal level.

Bartsch was on the best of terms with SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel, whom he met occasionally in the Einstein café in Berlin. Bartsch had also junked the pacifist pretences of his party and had for some time called upon the party to recognize the necessity for international “peace deployments” by the German army.

The conflict between the two camps was especially evident in the course of negotiations for a new coalition government in the state of Brandenburg. Lafontaine publicly opposed a coalition between the Left Party and the SPD in the state, which entailed agreement on a program to cut one in five public service jobs. For his part, Bartsch defended the Brandenburg agreement, and the two parties reached a coalition pact at the end of last year.

The various responses to the rift between Lafontaine and Bartsch indicate the bitter character of the differences in the party.

While regional organizations in the west have called for the resignation of Bartsch, the chairmen of all of the party’s five regional organizations in East Germany have lined up behind the national secretary. They issued a joint statement that has since won the support of the so-called Forum for Democratic Socialism. This forum is a right-wing current in the Left Party which emerged to defend the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party Senate in Berlin against criticism from the left.

In a short and tersely worded statement, the co-chairman of the Left Party, Lothar Bisky (formerly PDS), rejected the accusations against Bartsch, while Bodo Ramelow, head of the Left Party parliamentary faction in Thuringia, told the *Berliner Zeitung*, “The demand now being raised for Bartsch’s resignation is equivalent to deliberately removing a wheel from a car.”

The most striking feature of the whole affair is the way the conflict is being conducted within the Left Party. No one wants to address the real issues at stake. Instead, details from allegedly private letters are distributed to the media in order to influence tendencies in the party. Lafontaine is not officially involved in the debate, and Bartsch denies that there are any differences. This demonstrates that there are no principled political differences between the opposing camps.

The dispute between Lafontaine and Bartsch will likely decide the specific manner in which the Left Party seeks to prop up the bourgeois system in the near future. As social conflicts grow, Lafontaine is convinced that any premature move by the Left Party towards participation in a federal government would rapidly discredit the party, and it would be unable to carry out its function as a tool of the bourgeoisie. The lobby behind Bartsch, however, is fearful that Lafontaine’s leftist rhetoric could stoke up popular discontent—not least against the anti-social policies of the Left Party in power—and undermine its role as a factor for political stability in the east of the country. Underlying these tactical differences, both camps are united in their unconditional defense of the bourgeois order against any independent movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**