

Germany: The Left Party and the parliamentary Defence Committee

Marius Heuser
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The purpose of the Defence Committee of the Bundestag (parliament) is to feign democratic control where none exists. Officially, it has the task of controlling the armed forces, but its members are bound by strict confidentiality. They are not even supposed to tell their parliamentary colleagues about the information they have learned. This makes any real control impossible.

“Its discussions are often highly sensitive, so the Defence Committee convenes behind closed doors,” reads the official Bundestag website. “In the end, it concerns the security of the country, our allies and not least the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] soldiers in action.” To remove any possible doubt that the committee is there to support military operations abroad, it says in the next sentence, “In international security policy, the role of Germany and the mandate of the Bundeswehr have changed, especially in light of global terrorism.”

The role of the Defence Committee is thus to provide the necessary backing in parliament, and through this also in the population, for Bundeswehr deployments in Afghanistan and in other areas. It ensures the defence budget and military expenditure pass smoothly over any parliamentary hurdles, without parliament and the public knowing what is at stake. It is not a committee exercising control, but conducting a cover-up.

When the Green Party entered the Bundestag for the first time in 1983, it unleashed a fierce debate among the old parties. Could these former pacifists be trusted? Would they keep secret what was discussed behind closed doors? Could the committee be enlarged and the Greens be given two seats? These concerns proved unfounded. The Greens upheld the duty of secrecy and eventually became consistent supporters of war. They did not change the committee, the committee changed them.

Unlike the Greens, such concerns were never expressed about the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) or the Left Party, not even last autumn when Christine

Buchholz, an active member of the International Socialist Tendency (IST—which in Germany was known as *Linksruck* until 2007), took a seat on the Defence Committee for the Left Party. The Left Party’s support for the committee’s work casts a sharp light on the character of this party and in particular on the role of the IST, which presents itself as a left-wing tendency.

The important role played by the Defence Committee in support of the Bundeswehr emerged again recently in the Kunduz massacre. When Defence Minister Franz-Josef Jung claimed an air strike ordered by a German colonel on two hijacked tankers had not caused any civilian casualties and served to prevent an imminent threat, committee members already knew that he was lying. They had seen reports showing that dozens of civilians had died and that the primary targets of the attack were insurgents suspected of being in the vicinity of the tankers.

No member of the Defence Committee informed the public about this, as Chancellor Angela Merkel gave her backing to Jung and expressly rejected any criticism of Colonel Klein’s decision at home and abroad. Even the representative of the Left Party on the committee, Paul Schäfer, maintained the rule of silence, but not the right wing and the military. Through targeting information at *Bild* newspaper, they sparked a campaign for the revoking of any criminal responsibility on the part of the Bundeswehr and to give it the right to kill.

Then, the Defence Committee constituted itself as a Committee of Inquiry to investigate the background of the Kunduz massacre—which it had covered up—of course, behind closed doors.

The fact that the Left Party participated in this charade is not surprising. Though it poses as a party of peace in election campaigns, it is always willing to relent when its support is actually needed.

Thus, many representatives of the party distanced themselves from the demand for an immediate withdrawal

of German troops from Afghanistan when, before the last general election, a coalition government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) seemed possible. The defence spokesman of the Left party, Paul Schäfer, who is also one of its representatives on the Defence Committee, demanded instead an “exit strategy”—a term coined by US President Obama.

From 1970 to 1988, Schäfer was a member of the Stalinist German Communist Party (DKP). In 1993, he joined the SPD, and then the PDS in 2000. Alongside Schäfer, three other Left party representatives sit on the Defence Committee: the trade unionist Inge Höger; Harald Koch, a long-time member of the SED, the ruling Stalinist party in former East Germany; and Christine Buchholz.

For more than 15 years, Buchholz has been a member of the German section of the IST, which was called *Linksruck* until 2007. She belongs to the small circle of leaders of the group. As part of this, she has worked with the SPD and the unions, in anti-fascist groups and in the Social Forum. When the Election Alternative (WASG) was founded in 2004, Buchholz together with her organisation entered the new party.

Here, she quickly proved herself a reliable pillar of the party leadership. When negotiations on the merger of the PDS and WASG to form the Left Party ran into problems, *Linksruck* opposed all those who made any, even mild criticism from the left.

This was especially apparent in Berlin, where the PDS was discredited by its years in the city legislature in collaboration with the SPD, so that in 2006 the Berlin WASG branch stood a separate list of candidates. The Berlin branch of the WASG, in which another ex-radical group, *Sozialistische Alternative Voran*, set the tone, was not motivated by any principled considerations. It merely maintained that the Left Party would have no chance of gaining influence if it was identified from the start with the policy of the Berlin Senate (city legislature). It has since joined the Left Party.

But for *Linksruck*, even this went too far. On May 3, 2006, Buchholz, as a member of the federal leadership of the WASG, publicly attacked the critics of the Berlin Senate. Instead of supporting the WASG in Berlin, she wrote, “The members and sympathisers of the WASG should use all their energy in the joint development of a new party out of the Left Party, the PDS, the WASG and others.” This party must, she wrote elsewhere, “be a plural left” that emphasises what is held in common and not what divides us.

When the merger succeeded in 2007, *Linksruck* dissolved itself completely into the Left Party. The former members founded the network *marx21* within the Left Party and have been richly rewarded for their services. Many were given well-paid positions working for Bundestag deputies; some even became parliamentary deputies themselves. In addition to Buchholz, who moved into the Bundestag, there is Janine Wissler, who sits in the Hesse state parliament, and Luigi Wolf, who holds the chairmanship of the Left Party Federal Student Association.

The incorporation of *Linksruck* into the Left Party is in accordance with the political traditions of this group. It was formed in 1993 by a similar manoeuvre, when the then-SAG *Sozialistische Arbeitergruppe* (Socialist Workers’ Group) was dissolved into the *Jusos* (*Young Socialists*). Whatever the changes in name or orientation, it has always remained the German section of the IST and is closely linked to the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

The SWP’s history dates back to the year 1951, when Tony Cliff founded the Socialist Review Group. Cliff held that the stabilisation of capitalism and the consolidation of the Stalinist regime after the Second World War had undermined the Fourth International, and he turned away from Trotskyism. Cliff described the Soviet Union as “state capitalist” and refused to defend it against imperialist attacks.

Since then, the history of this tendency is an endless sequence of adaptations to the social democratic and trade union bureaucracy. In 1998, in Germany, it even called for the election of Gerhard Schröder, whose government became infamous for making the most far-reaching attacks on workers’ rights since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949.

Through Buchholz’s entry into the Defence Committee—the holy of holies of the state security apparatus—the integration of this tendency into the structures of bourgeois rule has taken on a new quality. This is itself an expression of a politically extremely critical situation. The room for manoeuvre on the left flank of the bureaucracy is diminishing.



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