

The resignation of Oscar Lafontaine and the crisis of the Left Party

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The decision by Oskar Lafontaine to resign as chairman of the Left Party and give up his parliamentary seat has thrown the party into a deep crisis.

Lafontaine declared that his decision was based “exclusively on health reasons.” In December, he had an operation to deal with a cancer condition. The operation was successful, but his state of health meant that he was advised to limit his political activity. Therefore, Lafontaine stated last weekend he intended to restrict his work to the state parliament in Saarland, where he also sits as a deputy. He gave no details on his state of health. Media reports state his prostate gland illness was recognised and treated in time.

The state of health of Lafontaine is insufficient, however, to account for the profound state of crisis in the party that he played a major role in founding. In reality, his resignation is confirmation that his political conceptions have failed.

Lafontaine already has one resignation behind him. Eleven years ago, he resigned from his posts as chairman of the Social Democratic Party, federal finance minister, and vice-chancellor of the SPD-Green coalition following fierce pressure from business circles. When Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) stressed that he would not implement any policies against the interests of big business and the banks, Lafontaine resigned without putting up any sort of fight, leaving Schröder and the rest of the SPD leadership to press ahead with massive attacks on the working class in the form of the government’s Agenda 2010.

Lafontaine only returned to political life after huge numbers of SPD members and voters turned their backs on the party. The decay of social democracy was greeted with alarm signals by significant layers of the

bourgeoisie—after all, the SPD had played a crucial role in maintaining bourgeois order in Germany for nearly a century. In 1918, it was the SPD that ensured the survival of capitalism after the emperor had been swept from his throne. After the Second World War, the SPD defended private property and the orientation to the West. Following the student revolts and spontaneous strikes of 1968/1969, it was SPD leader Willy Brandt who defused the protests.

Lafontaine’s goal was to prevent the decline of the SPD. To this end, he organised the merger of the Election Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) in west Germany—a repository of disillusioned social democrats and trade union bureaucrats—with the Party of Democratic Socialism, which emerged from the east German Stalinist party, possessed a large party apparatus and had numerous positions in east German state and municipal administrations.

From the outset, the new party was characterised by deep divisions. In east German states, the newly formed Left Party used its political influence and positions to enforce the radical social attacks embodied in Agenda 2010, while Lafontaine toured the country employing leftist clichés to denounce social cuts and job reductions. The Left Party never had a genuine programme. Lafontaine’s oppositional poses were of a purely rhetorical nature based on maintaining social-democratic illusions for as long as possible. Wherever the Left Party assumed office, its politics were indistinguishable from the SPD and conservative parties.

Lafontaine’s main project was a future coalition between the SPD and Left Party at a federal level aimed at preventing any broad popular mobilisation against the political elite. It is no coincidence that Lafontaine saw himself as the political heir of Willy Brandt.

Brandt had received his political training before the war in the centrist Socialist Workers Party before becoming mayor of Berlin after the war. He then took over as vice-chancellor of a grand coalition of conservative parties and the SPD before finally assuming the post of chancellor. As chancellor, he was able to largely dissipate the 1968 protest movement, which had also won the support of broad sections of workers, by promising more democracy and social reforms.

Lafontaine also has considerable experience in defusing social crises. As long-time prime minister of Saarland he succeeded in closing down swathes of the state's steel and mining industries without provoking a social rebellion.

Now, Lafontaine's plans have been thwarted by the collapse of the international financial system and the consequent economic crisis. His social-reformist demagogy became completely untenable. He had nothing more to offer in the way of a solution to the social injustices he addressed in his speeches than appeals to the German constitution, which refers to the social responsibility attached to wealth. Any prospect that one could return to the sort of reformist policies pursued 40 years earlier by Willy Brandt was rendered absurd on a daily basis by the devastating consequences of the economic crisis.

Lafontaine's attempts to form a coalition with the SPD at a state level in Saarland and in Thuringia as preparation for federal government participation also collapsed after the SPD in Thuringia and the Greens in Saarland decided to form coalitions with the Christian Democratic Union. The only state to produce an SPD-Left Party coalition was Brandenburg, on a programme based on the slashing of one in five public service jobs.

Tensions had been mounting in the Left Party long before Lafontaine's cancer condition became public. In the east, where the party is deeply integrated into the state apparatus, Lafontaine's populist rhetoric was increasingly regarded as disruptive, while in the west the party feared it could lose its credibility much too quickly if it too readily identified itself with the austerity policies of the German government.

The tensions then erupted in an open conflict between Lafontaine and the Left Party secretary, Dietmar Bartsch. Bartsch, whose power base rested in the east of the country, was accused by western party circles of spreading rumours about an extramarital affair by

Lafontaine. In the end, Bartsch was forced to resign following pressure from Lafontaine. Now, Lafontaine has also thrown in the towel. His departure will only intensify tensions in the Left Party, as is already apparent from the conflicts emerging over who should take his place.

With a party congress due in May, the leadership hoped it could dispense with its existing compromise solution of a dual leadership drawn equally from the east and west of the country. But frictions are so advanced that the latest proposal for a new leadership involves not only two new chairpersons (once again representing east and west), but also two party secretaries.

The decision for the two future chairpersons makes clear the future orientation of the party. The former Stalinist functionary Gesine Löttsch from Berlin has regularly supported the right-wing policies of the capital city's Senate (also a coalition of the Left Party and SPD), while the western candidate Klaus Ernst is a full-time official for the IG Metall engineering union and typifies that layer of bureaucrats who have long since adopted the role of company co-managers.

The future of the Left Party remains open. What is clear is that, based on its past, the party will inevitably react to this latest crisis by striving even harder to demonstrate its credentials as a force for the stabilisation of the capitalist order.



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