

Germany: Clashes in Left Party over draft programme

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The Left Party held its second federal congress in Rostock last weekend, where it elected new party committees and officials. Klaus Ernst and Gesine Löttsch succeed Lothar Bisky and Oskar Lafontaine as party co-chairs. Katja Kipping, Sahra Wagenknecht, Halina Wawyzniak and Heinz Bierbaum become the new deputy chairs.

There had been angry clashes in the party prior to the congress. In addition to personnel issues, disputes also flared up over a draft policy statement made public in March by the outgoing chairs Bisky and Lafontaine. The party is set to formally adopt the programme next year, and it will form the “basis for the development of the manifesto and strategic options for the Bundestag (parliament) election in 2013 and the European elections in 2014”. So far, the Left Party has not had a formal party programme. Following the merger of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative (WASG) to form the Left Party in 2007, a few so-called “programmatic cornerstones” were drawn up.

Originally, the Left Party had wanted to develop its first draft programme before the federal elections in 2009, but the Programme Committee was beset by internal squabbles. These conflicts have now flared up again with the publication of the draft text, and following the presentation by Bisky and Lafontaine, a fierce debate has ensued. The background to the conflict is the trench warfare between the Lafontaine-camp, which mainly comprises union bureaucrats and ex-radicals from the WASG, and the so-called “Realos” of the former PDS.

This controversy involves differences not over fundamentals but merely over tactics. The ever-worsening crisis of capitalism means the Left Party is needed all the more to enforce harsh social attacks and to defend the bourgeois state. The party is now represented in 13 of Germany’s 16 state parliaments and is already organizing the social cutbacks in the Berlin and Brandenburg state legislatures. Following elections in Thuringia and Saarland, the Left Party was willing to enter into a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, and is presently seeking to do the same in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Following the recent state elections there, the next government will have to push through tough social attacks against the population.

Against this background, the group around Lafontaine, whose imprimatur is on the draft, believes it is necessary for the party to distance itself from the SPD and the Greens, at least verbally, in order to benefit from the public mood of opposition to the policy of social cuts. To this end, the draft programme includes some radical phrases, such as the call for a “change in the relationships of ownership”. In addition, it says the Left Party fights for a “regime change” and will not participate in any government that “carries out privatizations [and] social or job cuts”.

Such positions meet with fierce resistance, mainly from the East German wing of the Left Party around outgoing general secretary Dietmar Bartsch and the leader of the Left Party in the Thuringian state parliament, Bodo Ramelow. On the one hand, they view such formulations as an obstacle to potential participation in government; on the other, they are concerned this might stoke up a further radicalization in the population. Ramelow, who was visibly annoyed with the draft, said, “I don’t like it when people run around us crying ‘everything that is not nailed down will be nationalized’.”

But a closer look at the text quickly establishes that its phoney radical phraseology is merely an attempt to disguise the true nature of the draft programme. In reality, the programme poses no threat to the existing bourgeois social order. It is explicitly committed to the bourgeois constitution.

The third chapter of the draft programme states, “A key question of social change remains the issue of property,” and “The Left Party fights for a change in the relationships of ownership.” But just two paragraphs further down it makes clear, “Which areas, enterprises and establishments would be covered by a democratic socialization and what public or collective forms of ownership [...] this would take must be decided through the democratic process.” In other words, the question would be decided through bourgeois parliamentary procedures, and not by a mobilization of the working class.

This pattern runs like a red thread through the entire text. The very generally formulated Chapters II and III include some radical phrases, which are then blunted by means of deliberately vague wording, or are turned into their opposite in practice.

Chapter II, for example, under the heading “Imperialism and War” makes a superficial criticism of imperialism and notes that, alongside the US, also “the EU tries to expand its position increasingly aggressively in the global struggle for power, influence and natural resources”. Chapter IV, entitled “Left Reform—Steps of social transformation” then says, the “European Union is the indispensable political grounds for safeguarding peace in Europe”, and should therefore “play a leading role in preventing civil conflict, for which the necessary capacity should be created.” The draft programme also calls for “an immediate end to all combat missions of the Bundeswehr [armed forces],” but does not exclude the possibility of military operations for purposes of “conflict prevention”.

Furthermore, the text urges that NATO be replaced by “a collective security system including Russia”. This demand meets the objectives of influential sections of the German bourgeoisie, which are seeking to establish stronger relations between the EU and Russia, both to secure strategic resources, on the one hand, and to forge an alliance against the US, on the other. Only recently, the most prominent representative of such a policy, Ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), wrote in a commentary for *Welt Online* that the EU could only hold its own between the power centres of the US and China if it entered an alliance with Russia.

More specific demands in the draft programme, especially in the fourth chapter, make its right-wing character even clearer. At the beginning of the chapter, it affirms that the Left Party bases itself completely on the German constitution and that it regards the Federal Republic of Germany as a “democratic and constitutional state”. The “left reforms” which are then raised represent a step back even from what is elaborated in the “programmatic cornerstones”. While the latter called for a pensionable age of 60, the draft programme only speaks about rejecting retirement at 67.

Against this background, the assertion made by large parts of the media that the draft programme was characterized by “class warfare rhetoric” and that the Left Party wanted to settle accounts with capitalism (*Spiegel Online*), is just as false and ridiculous as the assertion made by petty-bourgeois groups within the Left Party, such as the Socialist Alternative (SAV—affiliated to the British Militant group), who claim that “real capitalist development” will force the Left Party “to [adopt] a socialist programme.”

In fact, the opposite is the case: Only a week ago, the Left

Party supported the fast track parliamentary proceedings to enable passage of the so-called euro-rescue package, which will again transfer billions of euros of taxpayers’ money to the banks. And now the party’s supposedly “left-wing” state association in North Rhine-Westphalia is courting an SPD-Left Party-Green Party state government in Düsseldorf. Long before the elections, Wolfgang Zimmermann, spokesman of the Left Party in North Rhine-Westphalia, and part of the Anti-Capitalist Left (AKL), had spoken in favour of a government option. He was only waiting for a call from the SPD’s leading candidate, Hannelore Kraft, he told *Spiegel Online*: “Let’s just wait and see. The ball is now in the court of the SPD.”

Bärbel Beuermann, leader of the Left Party in North Rhine-Westphalia, and a member of the so-called Socialist Left (SL), also spoke in favour of government participation, stressing the party “should be both realistic and radical”.

Thus the “party lefts” in North Rhine-Westphalia are currently showing the real practice lying behind the draft programme’s rhetorical claim that they should not participate in “any government that carries out privatizations, social or job cuts”—the rhetoric that is being attacked so sharply by the “party right-wingers”. It is therefore wrong to speak of “left” and “right” currents within the Left Party. There is nothing left-wing about this party. In the meantime the supposed “lefts” are ready, as in Berlin and Brandenburg, to enter a state government and impose harsh social attacks against the population.

In its editorial about the draft programme, the SAV says it is in a “united front” with “left-reformist forces” to defend the “socialist aspirations of the programme” against the party’s right wing. This merely underscores the role of the SAV as a fig leaf for the right-wing politics of the national leadership.

The phrases in the draft programme, which the SAV claim represent a “step to the left” serve merely to block the way to an international socialist programme for workers and youth being radicalized by the crisis.

In the debate on the draft programme, the wing around Left Party general secretary Dietmar Bartsch was not even prepared to accept such hollow phrase-mongering. In the *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, “realo” leader Bartsch said the draft was in need of “improvement” and would therefore be revised: “In the end, it will be a different programme.”



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