

Germany: Left Party prepares for government

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24 May 2010

Last weekend the Left Party held its second federal congress in Rostock. After the trench warfare that had preceded the congress over personnel questions and the draft programme, the party strived to demonstrate broad unity.

The aim was to send out a signal to the media and other parties that in the midst of the ever-deepening crisis of capitalism, the Left Party is ready and able to assume government responsibility. And, as is already the case in Berlin and Brandenburg, the party is prepared to implement a policy of social devastation in other states.

To avoid open differences surfacing at the congress, the senior party leadership had been selected in advance so as to provide a balance between East and West, male and female candidates and the various party currents. Before the vote on the party leadership, all speakers appealed for party cohesion.

In particular, chair Gregor Gysi took over the microphone several times and tried repeatedly to dampen the tensions simmering below the surface. In his speech on Sunday he urged comrades from the East to stop complaining about the failures of comrades from the West and vice versa. “It gets us no further, we must understand that. We have to change, all of us”. He also warned the various party tendencies, such as the Anti-Capitalist Left (AKL) and the right-wing Forum for Democratic Socialism, not to endanger the Left Party as a whole.

The election results at the congress show that Gysi’s appeals were heard, for the most part. The various tendencies shelved their tactical differences, and nodded through the new party leadership without debate. Gesine Löttsch, who embodies the traditions of the SED (Socialist Unity Party, the Stalinist state party in the former East Germany) and its successor the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), received 92.8 percent, the best result in any election for the party chair. Her fellow candidate to succeed the outgoing co-chairs Oskar Lafontaine and Lothar Bisky, the South German union bureaucrat Klaus Ernst, received 74.9 percent. After the clashes between Lafontaine and party General Secretary Dietmar Bartsch last year, and the role

that Ernst had played in this, the result was largely regarded as a success.

Candidates for deputy party co-chairs were Katja Kipping, Sahra Wagenknecht, Heinz Bierbaum and Halina Wawyzniak. Apart from the latter, all were elected with about 75 percent of delegate votes; Wawyzniak received only 57.8 percent.

The tensions between former SED and PDS members in East Germany and West German trade unionists and ex-radicals still exist below the surface, as was seen in the first round of voting on the women’s and men’s lists. Almost all of the East German candidates (both male and female) failed to gain the required support in the first round and were only confirmed in the second round. Many interpreted this as a signal of the power of the West German delegates. A leading party representative from East Germany spoke to Spiegel Online about a “culture of distrust” within the party.

The fact is that about two-thirds of all party members come from the East German states, where the Left Party controls the levers of power at the local and state level in many areas. This section of the Left Party are mistrustful of the fact that more and more members from the West lay claim to leadership positions. Moreover, there are tactical differences between the eastern and western wings of the party. While the latter tries to give themselves a left-wing and radical gloss, at least verbally, the so-called Realos (realists) in the East are not willing to go so far due to their participation in the state governments in Berlin and Brandenburg.

In their willingness to implement right-wing policies in practice, the East German wing has had the West German wing on its side for some time. Both during and prior to the congress, representatives of almost all the different party currents declared they were ready for a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Bodo Ramelow, party leader in the Thuringia state parliament, summed up the role of the Left Party in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “We have a

responsibility to govern. A coalition in NRW must not fail on our part. The election of Frau Kraft [SPD] as state premier must not fail due to us”.

The two leading candidates of the supposedly “left-wing” NRW state federation of the Left Party, Wolfgang Zimmermann of the Anti-Capitalist Left (AKL) and Bärbel Beuermann of the Socialist Left (SL), share this view. In the election campaign, both had voted for a coalition government. Once again, outgoing chair Oskar Lafontaine made clear that in the historical crisis of capitalism, when the Left Party is increasingly needed to shift the burden of the crisis onto the population, it is united in its readiness to fulfil this “duty”.

At the start of his farewell speech, Lafontaine spoke about the NRW election and told the delegates, “Let me say it quite officially: We are ready to join an SPD-Green coalition”. He combined this with the condition that the “destruction of the welfare state in Germany is stopped in the Bundesrat (Second Chamber)”. But in face of the social cutbacks for which the Left Party is responsible in Berlin and Brandenburg, this commands just as little credibility as Lafontaine’s subsequent tirade against the financial markets.

When he said that the “parliaments and governments are only puppet parliaments and puppet governments, which chase behind the financial markets and spend huge sums without knowing what they are actually doing”, he said this without any mention of his own party. In agreeing to fast-track proceedings in the Bundestag (federal parliament), the Left Party has several times ensured that hundreds of billions of euros have been transferred to the banks.

In the course of his speech, Lafontaine sketched out an economic programme that does not even begin to place a question mark over capitalism, and seeks to defend it. He summed up the “three pillars” of the Left Party’s economic policies under the letters “KFE”: “That is Keynesian economics, financial market regulation and economic governance at a European level”.

In the following discussion of this “programme”, Lafontaine then made it unmistakably clear that the Left Party represents the interests of the ruling class and not the workers. First, he justified the billions of euros for the banks, and stressed that “without Keynesianism, without the money pump of states and central banks, the economy would collapse”. He supported the call for economic governance at European level, something that right-wing French President Nicolas Sarkozy has long called for and is now supported by the German government.

And finally, Lafontaine, a long-time columnist for *Bild* newspaper, added to the agitation of the bourgeois media against the supposedly “profligate Greeks”, claiming, “The Greeks have always increased their wages too sharply”.

European economic governance is now required to prevent just that and to save the euro: “We need European economic governance. We need a body that coordinates financial policies now, which coordinates fiscal policy now, and especially coordinates wage policy now, otherwise the euro will break apart”.

This is hardly distinguishable from the policy of Angela Merkel and the federal government. In her government statement on Wednesday, Merkel also warned, “If the euro fails, Europe will fail”. To prevent this, coordination and unity were required, she stated; there should not be “a two-speed Europe”. She said there was “no alternative” to the €750 billion “rescue” package.

Merkel can obviously count on the support of the Left Party, even for this new round of financial gifts to banks worth billions. Michael Schlecht, chief economist of the Left Party’s parliamentary faction, wrote in an essay entitled “The Euro” that the rescue package was going in the “right direction”. “Under the dangerous pressure of the markets”, Merkel and the EU would implement “what the Left Party had long called for”.

In a situation where capitalism has failed and the world financial system confronts an abyss, the Left Party, like all other parties, is willing to save the system at the expense of working people. While the Left Party makes it possible to throw billions at the banks by agreeing to expedited parliamentary proceedings, they stand ready to aid the bourgeois state by taking over government responsibility in order to push through the necessary cuts and suppress any opposition in the population.

The party congress in Rostock was used to close ranks and prepare the party for this role. In this, it obviously succeeded: there was absolutely no criticism regarding the role of the Left Party as the party of social cuts and saviour of the banks.



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