

Germany: Left Party bows before SPD and Greens

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For several days, the German media has reported sharp disputes between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party on the one hand, and the Left Party on the other. The talk is about a deepening of divisions between the parties. However, a closer examination of the conflict reveals a somewhat different picture.

In the wake of the June 30 presidential election, the SPD and Greens attacked the Left Party for failing to vote for the SPD-Green Party candidate, the avowed anticommunist Joachim Gauck. They accused the Left Party of being responsible for the election of Christian Wulff (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), the candidate of the CDU/Free Democratic Party (FDP) government.

In reality, the Left Party has used the presidential election to signal that it wants closer cooperation with the SPD and Greens. Even before the SPD and Greens nominated Gauck, the Left Party appealed for the selection of a common candidate for the three parties. But by choosing Gauck without consulting the Left Party, the SPD and Greens made clear that any such agreement could only take place on their terms. The Left Party felt it necessary to propose its own candidate, the 74-year-old journalist Luc Jochimsen.

When Wulff failed to gain an absolute majority in the Federal Assembly in the first two ballots—due to a maneuver by the right wing in the CDU and FDP—the leaders of the SPD, Greens and Left Party sat down in the office of SPD party chair Frank-Walter Steinmeier to discuss the way forward. For the first time in ten years, the SPD invited former SPD chairman and outgoing leader of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, to a joint discussion.

At this meeting, Lafontaine offered to drop the Left Party's own candidate, and proposed former Environment Minister Klaus Töpfer (CDU) as a new joint candidate. But the SPD and the Greens insisted on keeping Gauck, after which the Left Party withdrew their own candidate and recommended its representatives abstain in the Federal Assembly.

At the Left Party's press conference, where parliamentary faction leader Gregor Gysi announced the decision, Green Party politician Werner Schulz burst in and shouted: "This is the failure of the Left Party!" There then followed a violent shouting match between Gysi and Schulz in front of the cameras.

Green Party chair Claudia Roth later accused the Left Party of "political failure." SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel said the Left Party had not been able to cast off its roots in the GDR (East Germany). He told the *Berliner Zeitung*: "In the Federal Assembly, under the leadership of Oskar Lafontaine of all people,

the successor party to the SED [Socialist Unity Party, the ruling Stalinist party in the former East Germany] has held sway again."

The chair of the Left Party, Klaus Ernst, then attacked Gabriel as an "unpredictable hooligan" who had used Gauck as "cannon fodder". His co-chair Gesine Lötzsch added that the Social Democrats had "gambled away" the presidential election: "You cannot organize majorities when we are rudely insulted."

Gysi demanded the SPD state whether it stood closer to the Christian Democrats and the FDP or the Left Party. "As long as it takes no position in this respect, you can't sort things out in a five-minute discussion before the third ballot."

However, the violence of the dispute is not due to any fundamental political differences. On the contrary, it flows from the fact that the three parties are seeking closer collaboration. Far from making an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition at the state or even federal level less likely, these conflicts attest to the fact that this project is now being pursued by all three with a previously unseen intensity. This is shown by the fact that despite the verbal attacks, all sides repeatedly stress that they would, in principle, be willing to cooperate, and also consider this desirable.

Gabriel also used his attack on the Left Party in the *Berliner Zeitung* to reach out a hand to the pragmatists in the party. The reformers in the Left Party should not permit Lafontaine and Vice Chair Sahra Wagenknecht to hold sway "with their mix of Machiavellianism and dogmatic communism", he said. The Social Democrats were prepared to examine whether the political content of the Left Party was right. "And they wouldn't do this as long as the party regarded an investigator of [the] Stasi [crimes] and civil rights advocate like Joachim Gauck as an enemy, even though he was, in fact, a great democrat and fighter for freedom."

The argument advanced by the chair of the Green Party parliamentary faction, Renate Künast, is also very interesting. Künast said that by rejecting Gauck, the Left Party had pushed an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition at federal level "into the far distance." In its present state, the Left Party was "not politically viable". If nothing changed fundamentally, the question of an SPD-Left Party-Green government "would not be posed in 2010," when the next federal elections are due. Conversely, Künast was holding up the prospect of much closer cooperation with the Left Party—including a joint federal government—if only it abandoned its rejection of Gauck.

The reaction of the Left Party to these attacks was also primarily marked by a desire for closer cooperation. Like a whipped dog,

Gysi first announced that at least the fact that the SPD was now finally speaking with the Left Party was positive. He later said that SPD-Left Party-Green coalitions had not foundered due to his party. The problem did not lie with the Left Party.

Only a week after the presidential election, the Left Party made a renewed push towards the SPD and invited them to an opposition summit. The challenge for the two opposition parties was the social policies of the Christian Democratic/FDP government, said Left Party chair Klaus Ernst, and urged the SPD to hold talks with them. "In important matters such as preventing the cuts package and the antisocial capitation scheme, people expected more unity from the opposition," said Ernst.

The SPD immediately rejected the Left Party's offer, and party leader Gabriel called the proposal an "expression of extreme helplessness." The Left Party should first make clear whether it was still based on its past as the successor to the SED or wanted to become a democratic party of reforms.

At the same time, Gabriel again signaled that a coalition would be possible at a federal level with a more pragmatic Left Party. If "democrats, pragmatists, realists" held sway in the Left Party, "then there would be enough common ground with the SPD to talk about government action" at the federal and state level, Gabriel let it be known.

The "pragmatists" about whom Gabriel talks may be much further advanced with their project of SPD-Left Party-Green collaboration than he may be aware. Already on the day of the presidential election, a group of 25 politicians from the SPD, Greens and the Left Party, describing itself as the Oslo Group, agreed on a joint paper entitled "Life is more colorful", which is meant as direct preparation for an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition. In order for such a coalition to be crisis-proof, it must "share common values and also be sure of the support of extra-parliamentary coalition partners," they declared.

In the eyes of the ruling class, the need for such coalitions arises from the current crisis of the CDU/FDP government. For some time, sections of the corporate and political establishment have considered that it would be easier to push through unpopular austerity measures with the help of a "left" government and in close cooperation with the unions. The SPD, Greens and Left Party are now preparing for one such "left" alternative to the current coalition, which could soon be the preferred option for the ruling class, and which has absolutely nothing progressive about it.

The SPD and Greens will have to rely upon the support of the Left Party and the unions because the population is still well aware that the current attacks on working and living conditions were prepared by the SPD-Green Hartz IV and Agenda 2010 welfare and labor "reforms". This was only too clear at the recent demonstrations against the austerity measures of the federal government. At a protest in Stuttgart, speakers from the SPD and Greens were jeered by demonstrators, and shouts of "Hartz IV, that was you" and "Who has betrayed us, the social democrats" could be heard. A group of young people even threw eggs, bottles and other objects at the stage.

The fact that the Left Party, whose rightwing political course in Berlin and Brandenburg and in many municipalities in the former East Germany is widely known, enjoys a "leftwing" image is

especially due to its many middle class support groups.

These groups try hard to conceal the bourgeois character of the Left Party and fuel the dangerous illusion that it could be used to defend workers' interests. In the current political situation this perspective leads directly to supporting the efforts of the ruling class to involve the SPD in the government as an alternative to the CDU/FDP coalition.

How far this rightwing development has progressed is shown by an editorial about the recent demonstrations on the website of the group Marx 21 (formerly Linksruck), which works within the Left Party, and whose members have risen to leadership positions.

In this commentary, cynically entitled "Learn from history", Dirk Spöri, a member of the National Council of the Left Party in Baden-Württemberg, demands that the protests against the government's austerity measures be subordinated to the control of the two Hartz-IV parties.

"Not to accept the SPD and Greens as speakers at demonstrations and coalition partners...is wrong, and prevents the necessary expansion of protests in the coming months." With these words, Spöri attacks all those at the Stuttgart demonstration who had booed the SPD and Green Party speakers. To organize "really large demonstrations and political strikes against the cuts...requires a much larger participation than on June 12. To achieve this, support is also needed from the Hartz IV parties like the SPD and the Greens."

The CDU/FDP government is clearly in a deep crisis. The global economic crisis has overturned all the certainties of the postwar period. The German bourgeoisie finds itself confronted by both domestic and growing foreign policy challenges. To enforce the attacks on the working class requires the integration of the social democratic and trade union apparatus. Because of its traditional anti-Americanism, and especially under conditions of a growing conflict between the USA and Germany, the Left Party could play an important role in the reorientation of German foreign policy.

Notable in this regard is the announcement that Oskar Lafontaine, just weeks after his second retirement from federal politics, will take over the presidency of a newly created "International Commission" of the Left Party, as an "advisory body of the party leadership". Lafontaine is tasked with "developing proposals for international policy" and preparing the "decisions, positions of the party leadership and activities within the international relations of the party."



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