

# Conflicts erupt within the German Left Party

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In recent weeks, the German media has featured numerous exposés on the leader of the German Left Party, Klaus Ernst, asserting that Ernst drives a Porsche, possesses a property in the Austrian Alps close to Kitzbühel, and has an income of approximately 13,000 euros per month.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote of “Porsche Klaus”, a man “living a lie”. *Spiegel Online* questioned whether Klaus’s lifestyle was compatible with a party claiming to defend the interests of the socially disadvantaged.

Within the Left Party, it was above all members of the eastern wing who picked up on the criticisms of Ernst, i.e., those whose origins lie in the former Stalinist ruling party of East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Ernst is a former high-ranking official of the metal workers union, whose power rests on a network of trade union bureaucrats in the Left Party.

One parliamentary deputy from the east, Michael Leutert, who is affiliated with the right-wing “Forum for Democratic Socialism”, asked in *Spiegel Online*, “How can I as an ordinary member of the party encourage people to donate 5 euros to the party when the party is so generous when it comes to the remuneration of leading personnel?” He noted that “there was enormous discontent within the party base”. The Left Party had to watch out “that we do not lose our credibility”.

The Left Party European Deputy (also from the east of the country) Cornelia Ernst complained in the newspaper *Die Welt* that extra payments made to Ernst on top of his salary as a parliamentary deputy were indefensible. It is “incomprehensible”, she said, that Ernst receives several thousand euros more, while the co-chair of the party, Gesine Löttsch, decided to do without the payment.

As long as the criticisms were mainly raised by prominent party members from the east, they reflected

tactical differences with the western wing, which has its origins in a grouping of trade union bureaucrats, ex-Social Democratic Party (SPD) members and former organizations of the petty-bourgeois “left”.

In the eastern part of the country, the Left Party and its forerunner, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), have for a long time played a leading role in government at the state and local level and imposed brutal social cuts on the working population. Prominent representatives of the party in the east, such as Dietmar Bartsch and Bodo Ramelow, are urging the party to orient toward entering a coalition with the Social Democrats and the Greens at the federal level.

For this reason they want to do away with the type of leftist rhetoric occasionally employed by the western wing of the party, while the latter, led by former SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine and Ernst, fears that abandoning the party’s leftist demagogy too soon might hamper its electoral fortunes.

In the past week, however, it has become clear that the Left Party is beset by divisions not only between its eastern and western wings, but also between other cliques.

On August 15, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* cited an internal dossier entitled “Quo Vadis Left Party in Bavaria?—a Retrospective.” The author of the document, the treasurer of the Bavarian regional organization of the Left Party, Ulrich Voß, makes various charges against Ernst.

Voß is close to the so-called “Anti-Capitalist Left” (AKL) faction, the nominal left wing of the party. The AKL is a collection of former members of middle-class “left” organizations who joined the western wing of the PDS prior to its merger with Ernst’s Election Alternative group (WASG) to form the Left Party.

Voß, a long-time opponent of Ernst, has joined the mudslinging within the party on a thoroughly unprincipled basis. He has joined the chorus of former

Stalinists in the east with accusations of fraud and financial misconduct that might well stir the state prosecutor into action.

Questions of political principle play as little a role in the dispute as do the concerns and interests of workers and the unemployed. Instead, all the rival factions appeal to the media and the state and try to implicate their opponents in scandals.

According to the dossier provided by Voß, a third of the membership of the Left Party in Bavaria consists of “phantom members”, with some districts listing persons as members who had never joined the party. Others have not paid dues for a long time and should have been dropped as members. There are, he alleges, cases “where members died a long time ago but were not removed from membership lists”.

These phantom members have been used for factional purposes to influence the composition of delegations to party congresses, Voß told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He raised his “strong suspicion that, in the main, the Ernst wing of the party had profited” from such tactics. Conditions reminded him of “those at the beginning of the Stalin era”.

In *Spiegel Online*, Voß announced that he would refuse to sign the financial report of the regional organization. “Under no circumstances” was he prepared to legitimize “anti-democratic” and “even partly criminal actions” with his signature. If Voß holds to this position, the financial report of the federal Left Party will also be invalid, with heavy fines against the party as a consequence.

Ernst responded by rejecting all the accusations against him as “perfectly absurd”. He told *Stern.de* that “the affair consisted of a vile plot organized by officiating state treasurer Ulrich Voß”. The chairperson of the Left Party in Bavaria, Eva Mendl, spoke of “political character assassination” and announced that legal and internal party measures against Voß would be considered. She requested him to “immediately resign from his post”.

A variety of reactions have emerged within the national leadership of the Left Party in Berlin. Co-Chair Gesine Löttsch has so far given her backing to Ernst, accusing Voß of refusing to communicate and failing to adequately carry out his functions. However, *Spiegel Online* reports that another “prominent Left member of the Bundestag” has called for the resignation of Ernst.

There are, according to the Internet article, “considerable doubts” over Ernst’s future as party chairman.

The question of whether Ernst remains chairman of the Left Party remains open. The mudslinging in the Left Party, however, makes one thing abundantly clear—there is not a single faction within the party that fights on a principled basis. All of the competing cliques are above all concerned with vested interests, power and influence.

They are all prepared to assume governmental responsibility in the midst of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s in order to shift the burden onto the working class. Just a few weeks ago, the Left Party in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) opened the way for an SPD-Green minority state government that is preparing massive social cuts. The leader of the Left Party NRW parliamentary group is Wolfgang Zimmermann, who, like Voß in Bavaria, is associated with the Anti-Capitalist Left faction.



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