

German Left Party in crisis

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On the weekend of August 27-28, the parliamentary faction of the Left Party met in closed session in the northeast German city of Rostock. The meeting was originally planned to support the party's election campaign in the eastern states of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin, where state parliaments will be elected on September 4 and 18 respectively. Instead the meeting was devoted to the crisis currently raging in the Left Party.

The poll numbers of the Left Party have declined for months. Between 2008 and 2010 the Left Party achieved the 5 percent minimum for parliamentary representation in all German states with the exception of Bavaria. In the general election in 2009 the party won nearly 12 percent of the vote. This year, however, the party has failed to win the 5 percent necessary to re-enter the state parliaments in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate.

In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) headed the administration from 1998 to 2006, the Left Party is expected to re-enter the state parliament. But it is questionable whether it will receive enough support to achieve its aim of replacing the conservative Christian Democratic Union as coalition partner of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Even in its stronghold, Berlin, where the Left Party has governed in a coalition with the SPD for the past 10 years, the party confronts the possibility of being squeezed out of power with the SPD eyeing a future coalition with the Greens.

Both the media and critics inside the party blame its current decline on its co-chairs, Gesine Löttsch and Klaus Ernst, who took over from Oskar Lafontaine and Lothar Bisky over a year ago. Löttsch and Ernst are accused of failing to reconcile the different factions within the party. In an effort to hold together the party's fractious wings, they have pursued a frantic zigzag course, which has only fueled conflict.

Löttsch, for example, sought to pacify the party's former

East German Stalinist cadre by referring to a "Road to Communism," in which she described the Berlin Wall as a result of the Second World War. Under pressure from the media and political opponents, who accused her of being "too soft" on the GDR, she then beat a humiliating retreat.

The same fate befell a birthday greeting to "Dear Comrade Fidel Castro," which bore the signature of Löttsch and Ernst. It described Cuba as "a model and landmark for many peoples of the world" and asserted that the 85-year-old Castro could "look back with pride on a battle-filled life and successful work at the head of the Cuban revolution." Both subsequently distanced themselves from the letter. Ernst said he had never even seen it.

The publicly conducted intra-party bickering, and the attacks by the press on the two party leaders, led to an angry response from party campaigners in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, who were desperately attempting to demonstrate their reliability as partners in government.

The disputes over Löttsch and Ernst, however, are just a symptom of the crisis in the Left Party.

Since its foundation four years ago the Left Party has played a double role. Firstly, it has sought to capture voters disappointed by the SPD and prevent an opposition movement that evolved beyond the control of the SPD and trade unions. Secondly, it serves the SPD and the Greens as a coalition partner and parliamentary prop.

If one puts aside the occasional radical posturing and pseudo-socialist phraseology, the main priority of the Left Party is to conduct itself in a statesmanlike fashion while proceeding against the socially deprived with an iron hand. The intensifying international economic crisis has made it increasingly difficult for the party to maintain this balancing act and is forcing the party to show its true colors.

The result is a lurch to the right, not only by those involved in

government, but also by the party's alleged "left". Sahra Wagenknecht, the former icon of the Communist Platform, has written a book praising Ludwig Erhard, the CDU chancellor of the 1960s. And groups such as the Socialist Alternative (SAV), which stood candidates against the Left Party in Berlin five years ago, are now promoting the election campaign for the discredited party in Berlin.

The Rostock meeting made no attempt to resolve any of the political differences. Instead the meeting began with appeals for unity. At the start, parliamentary party leader Gregor Gysi warned the party's parliamentary deputies in a closed session to keep criticism of the party chairmen to themselves. Oskar Lafontaine warned that the party was doomed "to fail" if it made public its differences. "If I say anything to party leaders, then I say it in private," he warned.

The former party chairman had been invited as guest speaker in order to argue for delegates to adopt a tougher rhetoric.

Europe's financial crisis created an "ideal situation" for the Left Party to promote its ideas, he claimed. To this end the party needed to finally "speak out on those issues that really affect people." The "dictatorship of the financial system" was eroding democracy from within. Political leaders did nothing other than hastily implement the decisions of the finance elite, rather than determine the rules of the game. He held the failure of the banks responsible for the collapse of the economic system and demanded that the banking system and financial markets be regulated and the wealthy called to task to reduce debt in Europe.

In terms of political content, however, Lafontaine has nothing new to offer. He boasted that he had proposed the introduction of eurobonds several years ago. Such eurobonds are now called for by the German Employers' Association (BDI), the European Central Bank and other mainstream capitalist institutions. They would increase the power of the financial markets and be accompanied by additional massive austerity programs. Lafontaine had already supported the German government's multibillion-euro rescue package for the banks in 2008, declaring at the time there was "no alternative".

As reinforcement for his position Lafontaine brought along Heiner Flassbeck. The economist Flassbeck was Lafontaine's secretary in 1998/99, when the latter served briefly under Gerhard Schröder as federal finance minister. Flassbeck is currently chief economist at the United Nations Organization

for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva.

Flassbeck also called for the issue of eurobonds. He advocated a system of regulated world economy and demanded Keynesian type policies: "The United States, Europe, Japan can only recover on the basis of more consumption, otherwise they will perish". His recommended institutions for the implementation of such measures, as he had made clear on previous occasions, were the G20 and the United Nations. Both bodies are dominated by the most powerful imperialist powers.

Such prescriptions have nothing to do with leftist or socialist politics. Given the intensification of the capitalist crisis, the Left Party is preparing to take on even more responsibility for the defense of the bourgeois order. Lafontaine has never made a secret of the fact that he strives to establish a government coalition with the SPD. He is an experienced politician who had occupied leading functions at all levels of the SPD and the state for 40 years before setting up the Left Party in order to stop the hemorrhaging of support for the SPD.

However, the period in which it was possible to obscure right-wing politics with leftist phrases is over. The Left Party is being forced to reveal its true colors: it stands on the side of the SPD, the Greens and the capitalist system, against the majority of the population. Lafontaine's "project"—his term to describe the work of the Left Party—has run up against the brick wall of reality.

In the meantime, even the bourgeois media is expressing its concern that the Left Party could lose its role as a left cover for the bourgeois order.

An editorial in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned on Monday that the decline of the Left Party "left a dangerous void". From the point of view of democracy, Daniel Brössler writes, it was "entirely healthy" that at least one party in the past few years "voted in parliament against the German army mission in Afghanistan".



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