

# Germany's Left Party offers its services as a bulwark against revolution

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The Left Party held its second national congress in the eastern German city of Erfurt this weekend. The central issue up for debate at this "Erfurt congress of the Left Party" was a resolution on a party programme, to be voted on prior to the program's ratification by the party membership.

Although the Left Party has existed for four years, it had so far lacked a specific programme. When the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)—the successor party to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the Stalinist state party of East Germany—and the West German-based Election Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) banded together to form the Left Party in the summer of 2007, they agreed only on "programmatic cornerstones." This programmatic vagueness enabled the Left Party to unite various political tendencies within its ranks.

From the very beginning, the Left Party was a bureaucratic construct. In the east of the country, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the heirs of the SED regrouped to form the PDS, which played an important role in channeling protests against the East German regime along the lines of capitalist restoration and German national reunification. The PDS subsequently worked to contain the popular anger resulting from the economic and social decline of eastern Germany. Its ranks included many conservative pro-business politicians occupying important posts in municipal and state administrations.

In western Germany, veteran Social Democratic Party (SPD) and trade union functionaries came together to form the WASG because they feared that the SPD would lose its ability to control the working class in the wake of the widely despised Hartz welfare reforms. Also drawn to the WASG were groups falsely labeling themselves as socialist or revolutionary despite having been previously aligned with the SED regime and the trade union bureaucracy.

This amalgam of remnants of the Stalinist apparatus and sections of the trade union bureaucracy led to persistent political tension and fierce conflicts within the Left Party. An attempt was made at the Erfurt Congress to reconcile these disparate elements so that in the future the party would appear more united to the outside world. This goal was stated by the two party leaders, Gesine Löttsch and Klaus Ernst, in their invitation letter to delegates.

It required the adoption of a programme, the original version of which had been written under the direction of Oskar Lafontaine and amended several times in recent months. The current role of the Left Party—opposition party in name, establishment party in deeds—was to be incorporated into this programme. Despite a welter of anti-capitalist phrases, reform proposals and calls for a better society, the 80-page document seeks to fill the bill. The programme is fully committed to the existing order, its laws and institutions.

The preamble to the draft programme calls for "a different economic and social system: democratic socialism," and an economy and policies that focus on the "the vital needs and interests of the majority of the people." It advocates "a systemic change in the economy, because capitalism—based on inequality, exploitation, expansion and competition—is incompatible with these goals."

The text of the document, however, elaborates a defence of all of the pillars of capitalism: the anti-working class constitution of Germany, capitalist property relations, and international institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations.

Under the heading "Left Party Reform Projects: Steps Towards Social Transformation," the programme firmly commits itself to the constitution and the existing capitalist state. It states: "The Federal Republic of Germany is to be a democratic and constitutional state." Mention of a socialist state is studiously avoided.

In a later section, the draft programme pledges the party to the "overcoming of capitalism." But this is to be achieved by gradual reforms within the constraints of the existing social order. The document declares that "initial conditions for further democratic-socialist transformations" will be created as a "result of social and political struggles and changes in power relations."

All of this is identical to the old reformist programmes of social democracy. Every single reformist nostrum, no matter how old, outdated or ineffectual, can be found in the programme: from "business democracy" to "employee ownership" to "workers' participation in management."

The attempt to resuscitate the hackneyed phraseology of reform politics is not only grotesque, it serves to create as much political confusion as possible in order to prevent a socialist development in the working class.

The Left Party is intimately involved in the current transformation of the political landscape in Germany. The international financial and economic crisis is expressing itself in ever more dramatic forms. On the one hand, billions are going to the banks in the form of so-called rescue packages, and on the other hand, drastic austerity programmes imposing spending cuts across all social sectors are driving whole countries into an economic abyss and inciting social and national conflicts across Europe.

At the same time, opposition to these developments is growing. The largest demonstrations since the fall of the military junta 35 years ago have taken place in Greece in recent days. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets in Spain, Italy and other countries in the past week. This movement is part of an emerging international mobilisation of the working class, beginning with the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt and encompassing large parts of Europe as well as the US.

This radicalisation has had a two-fold effect on the Left Party. First, many voters have turned their backs on the party, especially in states and municipalities where it has been in government. The party congress took place only four weeks after the devastating defeat of the Left Party in Berlin. After ten years sharing power in Berlin with the SPD, the Left Party lost nearly two-thirds of its voters in the recent elections for the city-state's lower chamber.

On the other hand, interest in the Left Party is growing within the bourgeoisie. The congress has drawn exceptionally wide interest and attention from the media. Many commentators make no secret of their view that the Left Party is a useful tool not merely to impose austerity measures along the lines of the Berlin model—other parties

can do that—but also to keep the growing opposition of the population under control and thus stabilise the bourgeois status quo.

Sahra Wagenknecht, the Left Party's deputy chairperson, has been portrayed in the media in recent weeks as the new star of the organization. Wagenknecht, often choosing to appear in bright red costumes, is a guest on almost all the talk shows, is spotlighted in many of the major newspapers, and is continually being interviewed.

She is the very embodiment of Left Party cynicism. Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, she joined the Stalinist SED at the age of 20. She then went on to serve the PDS for many years as the figurehead of the party's Communist Platform faction. Her nostalgia for the former East Germany and her Stalinist views almost led to her expulsion from the party in the early 1990s. Today these attributes are used to fabricate a leftist image.

Earlier this year, Wagenknecht published a book on the economic crisis in which she declared Karl Marx to be no longer relevant, preferring instead to sing the praises of the market economy, competition and the "achievement-oriented" society. At the centre of Wagenknecht's criticism of capitalism is the idea that the free market has not been sufficiently restrained by state regulation. Her call for a strong state is gaining support from the ruling class because state regulation of the capitalist economy is impossible to achieve without the suppression of the working class.

The Left Party congress in Erfurt marks a new stage in the evolution of a party that is ever more intent on becoming a bulwark against a revolutionary socialist development of the working class.



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