

Germany's Left Party holds its congress: Verbal radicalism combined with calls for a strong state

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The Left Party congress held in the eastern German town of Erfurt ended last Sunday with scenes of jubilation and self-congratulation. Many delegates leapt from their seats, waving red flags, hugged one another and clapped their hands deliriously.

The reason for the celebration? Five hundred and three delegates had voted for the draft program proposed by the party's National Executive. That was 96.9 percent of those eligible to vote and far more than many had expected. Only four delegates voted against the draft program with twelve abstentions. Left Party leader Klaus Ernst was visibly relieved and spoke of a "historic moment."

Previously, many speakers, led by the current party leader Gregor Gysi and former party chief Oskar Lafontaine, had pleaded for unity. Internal party disputes must cease, Gysi demanded, adding: "So I tell you one thing. On Monday we are obliged to give up our navel-gazing."

Media reports also spoke of a "reconciliation congress". But when Lafontaine declared in his closing remarks that the state of the party was reflected in election results, this was widely regarded as a criticism of the so-called "reformers" in the party. Several leading Berlin party officials who recently suffered badly at the hands of the electorate ostentatiously left the conference hall at this point. Following ten years of rule by the Left Party in a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Berlin, the Left Party has lost the support of two-thirds of its voters.

The right-wing and anti-social policies of the administration in Berlin has led to fierce internal tensions. After all, the Left Party carried out policies that clearly contravened the promises contained in its election manifestos and speeches. These tensions still exist in the party, but a political realignment was evident at the latest congress. In the past, the contrast between word and deed—between what the Left Party promised in opposition and its behaviour when in power—was self evident.

Last weekend, however, the emphasis was placed on a verbally radical presentation of the party as "oppositional."

The strings were clearly being pulled by Lafontaine, a longtime SPD leader and veteran political operator. Although the former Left Party chairman resigned his post last year due to illness, he sat in the front row at the congress, intervened in the debates on a number of occasions and directed the proceedings. Lafontaine worked closely with Sahra Wagenknecht, the only leading member of the party who sat on both the Program and Drafting Committees in the run-up to the congress. Wagenknecht is the former leader of the ultra-Stalinist wing of the party, the so-called "Communist Platform."

Lafontaine and Wagenknecht sought to portray the Left Party as the true heir of historical, i.e., Marxist, social democracy. The congress' timing and venue were both chosen with this in mind. The Left Party congress coincided with the 120th anniversary of the historic Erfurt congress of the SPD. In October 1891, the SPD adopted a Marxist perspective known as the "Erfurt Programme". Along with Wagenknecht and Lafontaine, a number of other delegates made reference to this historic date drawing completely ridiculous and grotesque parallels.

In fact, the contrast between the 1891 "Erfurt Program" of the SPD and the new program adopted by the Left Party could hardly be greater. Coming on the heels of the repeal of the anti-Socialist Law, the first Erfurt Congress, led by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the Chairman of the Program Committee at that time, commenced a resolute campaign for Marxism in the working class. At their Erfurt congress, SPD delegates broke decisively with the Lassallean pragmatism of the Gotha Program (1875).

In contrast, the program of today's Left Party—adopted by an overwhelming majority—defends all of the foundations of the existing system, the German constitution, capitalist private

property, and the international institutions of imperialism, such as the European Union and the UN.

At the same time, the Left Party seeks to conceal its bourgeois program with radical-sounding phrases. The program, for example, calls for “a change of systems,” because the present one “is based on inequality, exploitation, and the expansion and competition” of capitalism. But just a few paragraphs later, the program makes it clear that the “overcoming of capitalism” is to take place within the context of the existing social order on the basis of gradual reforms.

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that the main priority for the Left Party is a strengthening of state power. Its criticism of the banks and the “unrestrained bustle of casino capitalism,” is bound up with its call for expanding state controls and strengthening state institutions. In this respect, the party rejects any form of workers’ control and explicitly calls for a strengthening of the existing bourgeois state.

The case is similar when the Left Party calls for the defence of the welfare state on the basis of the policies of Willy Brandt. In the second half of the 1960s, former SPD leader and later chancellor Brandt had sought to neutralise the left-wing Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (APO) at that time by introducing a few social reforms. For a period, Brandt was able to contain the political opposition and temporarily stabilise bourgeois rule on the basis of reforms in the sphere of education and the judiciary. These policies, however, were closely linked to strengthening the trade union bureaucracy, while at the same time building up the repressive forces of the state to prevent a socialist development of the working class.

The right-wing content of the Left Party’s new program was even more evident when Lafontaine proposed the creation of an internationally active humanitarian force to be named the “Willy Brandt Corps”. Following in the wake of the Greens, who just over ten years ago converted from pacifism to militarism on the basis of supporting the “humanitarian” actions of UN troops, the Left Party now seeks to justify its “peace policy” by stressing the “humanitarian” role of the military. Its main criticism of NATO is the fact that the alliance is primarily led by the US, Britain and France.

The purpose of the policy shift in Erfurt is revealed when one examines the broader political context. The Congress took place at the end of a week in which hundreds of thousands had taken part all over the world in protests against the dictatorship of international finance capital. In Greece, workers protested against the massive cuts in social spending introduced by the PASOK government with a two-day general strike the country’s largest demonstration since the overthrow of the military junta 35 years ago.

This global movement of the working class has intensified the political crisis in Europe and compounded the problems of reaching agreement on a plan to save the euro. The draconian welfare cuts demanded by the international banks and European governments will inevitably meet growing resistance. In Germany, France and Italy, the social democrats are standing ready to take over the reins of government, in order as their counterparts are already doing in Greece and Spain to impose vicious cuts in social spending in collaboration with the unions.

On Sunday, former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) appeared on German television to give his blessing to the former finance minister of the previous grand coalition, Peer Steinbrück, as future SPD candidate for the post of chancellor. The two men have co-authored a book, *Step by Step*, which is to be published this week. In the book Schmidt declares that: “One should not overestimate the importance of democracy for the world.” When asked what he meant by this Schmidt went on to praise the economic development of China, which would not have been possible based on “European concepts of democracy”.

This shameless glorification of authoritarian forms of rule goes hand in hand with preparations for a change of government involving the SPD. Sections of the German ruling elite believe that the SPD, either in alliance with the Christian Democrats or the Greens, would be better placed than the current government to enforce the planned social attacks.

At the same time, as the example of Greece makes clear, such a development will inevitably provoke massive resistance and fierce social conflicts. The Left Party is being groomed precisely to prevent the emergence of a new extra-parliamentary opposition and contain future struggles of the working class. This is the purpose of its current anti-capitalist rhetoric, combined with a program that unconditionally supports and defends the bourgeois state.



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