

Germany: Lafontaine and the Left Party move to the right

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A bitter contest for the leadership of the German Left Party continues to rage a week before the party's congress in Göttingen. Former chairman Oskar Lafontaine, who only recently offered to resume the post of party chairman, withdrew his candidacy early last week.

Lafontaine had conditioned his candidacy on the party's agreement that no rival candidate would stand against him. This ultimatum was aimed at Dietmar Bartsch, the party's former national director, who had registered his candidacy for the party chairmanship in January. Despite several high-level talks, Bartsch refused to withdraw his candidacy.

When parliamentary party leader Gregor Gysi and former party chairman Lothar Bisky declared their support for Bartsch in the dispute, Lafontaine backpedaled. His supporters demanded that Bartsch renounce his candidacy so a fresh start could be made at the party congress. But Bartsch refused to comply. At the moment, it is an open question who will be the party's future leaders.

The conflict between Bartsch and Lafontaine has a long history. It has been brewing since the founding of the party five years ago.

Bartsch comes from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor party to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the state party of Stalinist East Germany. The Party of Democratic Socialism inherited the SED's organisational apparatus and a large portion of its assets. Gathered in its ranks were many former Stalinist functionaries, offering their services to the bourgeois state after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Following a bitter conflict with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 1999, Lafontaine—having spent 40 years of his life in the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—quit his posts as SPD party chairman and federal finance minister and joined the Electoral Alternative for Social Justice (WASG), a group based in western Germany. The WASG consisted of disenchanting SPD members, trade union officials and former petty-bourgeois

radicals.

On Lafontaine's initiative, the PDS and WASG united to form the Left Party in the summer of 2007. The PDS already had an established party structure, financial backing and thousands of elected officials at the state and local level in eastern Germany. The WASG and especially Lafontaine offered the PDS the chance to take root in the west and gain representation in the Bundestag (federal parliament). Presenting itself as a purely eastern German party, the PDS had found it extremely difficult to reach the 5 percent vote threshold required to send delegates to the Bundestag.

Ever since its inception in eastern Germany, the PDS-Left Party has functioned as an organisation supporting to the political status quo. It held seats in state and local governments and ruthlessly implemented public spending cuts adopted by the federal government. This was most clearly revealed in Berlin, where the PDS allied with the SPD to control the Senate in January 2002 and instigated brutal attacks on social welfare programs. The SPD-PDS Senate withdrew from the municipal employers' association in order to slash public-sector workers' wages and salaries, privatised large parts of the city's public housing and municipal services, and sharply restricted social provisions.

The army of elected officials in eastern Germany—former and incumbent ministers, MPs, district authorities and mayors—constitutes Dietmar Bartsch's social and political base in the Left Party.

The party's participation in state governments in the west has been controversial. There, it attempted to pose as a "left" alternative to the SPD in order to obtain political offices and influence. It was thus continually embarrassed when fellow party members in the east, who had long been entrenched in ministries and local governments, willingly collaborated with the SPD and even the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). As a governing party in the east, the Left Party often implemented precisely the policies it attacked as an opposition party in the west.

No fundamental contradiction was operating here. It was merely that the Left Party in the east had already achieved what it still strove for in the west.

It would be quite wrong to see the dispute between Lafontaine and Bartsch as posing the question of the party's future development towards the left or the right. The conflict is about tactical differences between two right-wing currents in a party that offers itself as a buttress of the political establishment in a time of rapidly intensifying economic and social crisis.

A day after withdrawing his candidacy, Lafontaine participated in a talk show to air his differences with Bartsch. He said a party that fails to distinguish itself from the SPD in important questions of social policy makes itself superfluous, adding: "The painful loss of votes in the recent parliamentary elections makes that obvious." Following just one term in legislative office, the Left Party had been unable to regain entry to the state parliaments of both Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) in elections held in the beginning of May.

Lafontaine went on to declare that he considered policies "like those of Mélenchon in France and SYRIZA in Greece" to be necessary.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the French presidential candidate of the Coalition of the Radical Left, was for many years a member of the Socialist Party (PS) and a minister in the government of Lionel Jospin. It was not until 2009 that he founded a German-style Left Party, which then joined with the Communist Party to form a coalition of the left. A series of left-wing demagogic speeches enabled him to garner 11 percent of the vote in the first round of the French presidential elections in April. Immediately afterwards, he swung into the line behind the social-democratic candidate, François Hollande, granting the PS unconditional support in the runoff election.

It is very much the same with SYRIZA in Greece. Owing to its criticism of the EU's austerity programs, SYRIZA managed to triple its vote in the recent parliamentary elections. Since then, SYRIZA's chairman, Alexis Tsipras, has assured the European elite that he recognises the authority of the EU institutions and banks and is striving merely to make a few cosmetic changes in the austerity mandate.

Similarly, Lafontaine wants to stem the growing opposition to the Merkel government's anti-social policies and channel it back under the wing of the SPD and the trade unions. He tirelessly encourages the illusion that the SPD can be pressured to adopt social reform policies, like those of the 1970s. In doing so, he ignores the fact that such policies have failed worldwide

in the era of globalisation and every single reformist party—including the Left Party in power at the local and regional levels—has moved far to the right.

Lafontaine is certainly not averse to participating in a coalition government with the SPD—this is actually his goal. He simply believes the Left Party should not peremptorily sacrifice its ability to influence disaffected layers of the population by completely adapting itself to the SPD right now. According to Lafontaine, the fact that the Left Party gave parliamentary support to the minority government of the Social Democrats and Greens contributed to its devastating defeat in North Rhine-Westphalia.

The bourgeois character of the Left Party is seen in the fact that it displays all the symptoms of declining capitalist society. It is deeply divided, leaderless and disoriented, torn apart by internal tensions and factional fighting and plagued by self-doubt, as are all other bourgeois institutions.

After ten years in government, the Left Party in Berlin lost half of its voters last year. Its share in the balloting fell from 22.6 percent (2001) to 11.7 percent, ending its tenure in the city-state's government. In the same year, the party lost 5,000 members nationwide, and this year its share of the vote declined in every state election. It slumped from 5.6 to 2.5 percent in North Rhine-Westphalia, where the party lost 10 percent of its members.

The decline of the Left Party refutes all those who celebrated its founding five years ago, hailing this melting pot of old Stalinists, disillusioned social democrats, trade union bureaucrats and petty-bourgeois pseudo-leftists as the rebirth of the socialist labour movement.

We, on the other hand, wrote five years ago: "The unarticulated hopes that are linked with the establishment of the Left Party are, however, built on sand. The party has firmly decided to put a stop to the left-wing development from which it has profited in elections, and to return to the fold of the SPD. Its perspective is not to shape a new future but to revive the past." (See: "Germany: What does the Left Party want to achieve?").

This view has been fully confirmed.



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