

German Left Party congress exposes divisions and crisis

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6 June 2012

The Third Congress of the German Left Party, held last weekend in Göttingen, exposed sharp divisions and a deep crisis. The two-day meeting was marked by bitter clashes between opposing factions centered on the election of a new leadership.

The congress took place against the backdrop of a series of dramatic election defeats for the party and dwindling membership rolls. In 2009, the Left Party polled 11.9 percent in federal elections. Now, according to opinion polls, the party would have difficulty meeting the 5 percent threshold for gaining representation in the German parliament (Bundestag).

In a letter to delegates, the party's senior council presented a grim vision of the state of the party. The party program adopted last year had hardly played a role in the life of the party and had been partly undermined, the letter declared. "Elections have been lost, there is a loss of 8,000 members, a loss of political influence, a lack of transparency in inner-party life," the council complained.

In his speech to the congress, the outgoing chairman, Klaus Ernst, a leader of the faction centered in the west of the country, described the condition of the party. "We have approval ratings of 6 percent at the federal level," he said. "We failed by a large margin to enter the state parliaments in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. In Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia we were tossed out unceremoniously. Our poll numbers are crumbling in the east. Overall, we have lost 9,000 members since 2009. Entire district organizations in the west have dissolved. We have signs of decay in our party."

At the congress, the party demonstrated its inability to confront and discuss the political roots of this decline. Instead, the opposing wings attacked one another once again, claiming that each side was responsible for the deplorable state of the party.

For Klaus Ernst, the problem lay in the fact that the party had failed to establish a strong centre to counter the centrifugal forces within the party. "The only future for our party is to stay and fight together," he told the delegates.

Ernst was followed by the chairman of the parliamentary group, Gregor Gysi, who heads the faction based in the east. In an angry speech, Gysi expressed his frustration over the infighting between the opposing wings of the party.

Gysi complained in particular about a criticism raised by members from the former West Germany which, he said, reminded him of the "western arrogance that prevailed following the unification of our country." He continued: "But there is also hatred in our group in the Bundestag. For years, I have found myself

standing between two locomotives moving towards each other, and I know that one can end up being crushed. For years, I have been in a situation where I had to make myself unpopular with one group or another, and I'm fed up with it."

Gysi threatened to split the party. "Either we are able to choose a cooperative leadership that integrates and organizes the party, so that we are once again a major political force," he said, "or we are not in a position to do so." He continued, "In that case I say openly: It is better to separate cleanly rather than stay together with hatred, trickery and behind-the-back blows in a thoroughly ruined marriage."

Most of the media reports on the congress depicted the debate as a conflict between a left wing based mainly in western Germany and led by the former party chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, and a right wing with its base in what had been East Germany, headed by Gysi and the party's former national director, Dietmar Bartsch.

This presentation is misleading. The conflict within the party is between two right-wing factions with only marginal differences in terms of policy. Less than a year ago the delegates of both wings voted by 97 percent in favour of a joint policy statement that defended all the pillars of capitalism.

The media claim that the Lafontaine wing is not prepared to cooperate with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and participate in bourgeois governments is false. Lafontaine said so himself at the party congress. "Who made the offer in Hesse to form a government? It was the Left Party in Hesse," he said. "Who made it possible for the government (the SPD-Green Party minority government in North Rhine-Westphalia) to constitute itself in the first place? It was the Left in North Rhine-Westphalia. Who offered on television to support the SPD taking over the premiership of the state after their successful election? I did."

The intra-party dispute revolves, in fact, around the issue of how best to support the SPD.

Lafontaine was a leading member of the SPD for forty years until he quit in 1999 because he had concluded that the policy of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was unnecessarily undermining workers' support for the SPD. Lafontaine is convinced that what is needed is a party capable of controlling workers and suppressing the class struggle. He is a student of Willy Brandt, the SPD chancellor who defused radical demonstrations in the 1970s with the slogan "dare more democracy" and a significant expansion of the universities and public services. At the same time, he introduced reactionary laws aimed at suppressing any serious

opposition.

Lafontaine was the architect of the merger in 2007 between the group of prominent trade union officials and ex-social democrats organised in the Election Alternative (WASG) and the Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor party to the ruling East German Stalinist party. Lafontaine's aim from the start was to divert political radicalization among workers into harmless channels. He did so primarily by encouraging the illusion that it was possible to return to the type of social democratic reforms that had characterised the Brandt era, simply ignoring the process of globalization and the increased domination of the international financial markets over political life.

The Lafontaine wing is just as conservative and supportive of the bourgeois state as the Bartsch wing. Lafontaine's supporters have been recruited from long-time union officials with links to the SPD and former petty-bourgeois radicals whom the Left Party offered an opportunity to gain public office, with the attendant privileges. Ernst, the outgoing chairman and Lafontaine's right-hand man, was a full-time district secretary with the IG Metall trade union in Schweinfurt. His successor, Bernd Riexinger, comes from the same region and is a district secretary with the Verdi public service union.

Lafontaine believes the Left Party can fulfill its task only if adopts a radical tone verbally and keeps a certain distance from the SPD, at least during elections and when the SPD is in opposition. But like Bartsch, his main aim is to assist the SPD in coming to power as soon as the Left Party has achieved the necessary influence.

The Bartsch faction objects to Lafontaine's radical rhetoric and occasional digs at the SPD due its roots in the Stalinist apparatus and its extensive involvement in government at the state and local level in eastern Germany. In the east of the country, the Left Party shares power with the SPD (as well as the conservative Christian Democratic Union—CDU) in numerous local administrations, and the eastern-based faction therefore regards Lafontaine's rhetoric as disruptive to its daily functioning and its harmonious relations with the political establishment. Its motto is taken from the text book of Stalinist governance: "Adherence to public order is the highest civic duty."

The intensification of the capitalist crisis has revealed the basic right-wing orientation of the Left Party. This is the reason for its current decline and the fierce infighting that erupted over the issue of a new party leadership.

Lafontaine wanted to prevent at all costs the election of Bartsch as co-chairman (the constitution of the Left Party provides for a dual chair, including at least one woman), but was not prepared to air his differences publicly. Instead, he employed all sorts of maneuvers and back-room deals to prevent the election of Bartsch. To this end he had to exert all of his influence within the party.

Initially, he had proposed his own candidacy as chairman on the condition that Bartsch withdraw his candidacy. Bartsch refused to play along and Lafontaine withdrew from the race in favour of his close confidante, Bernd Riexinger. Lafontaine's girlfriend, Sarah Wagenknecht, also reserved the right to compete against Bartsch.

Following the election of Katja Kipping (east faction) by delegates, Wagenknecht made a speech in which she withdrew her

own nomination while strongly advising delegates not to pick Bartsch as co-chairman.

In a run-off vote, the largely unknown Riexinger, with 53.5 percent of the vote, was able to squeeze out Bartsch (45.2 percent). This leaves the Left Party in the hands of Kipping and Riexinger, each representing one of the two warring factions. Both have in common, however, their loyalty to the bourgeois state and their profound contempt for the working class.

Kipping is a member of the group "Institute for a Modern Solidarity," which she founded in early 2010 together with representatives from the SPD and the Greens. The aim of the institute is to provide the basis for closer cooperation between the three parties based on the subordination of the issue of growing social inequality to lifestyle questions and fostering the self-gratification of the petty-bourgeoisie.

Riexinger, 56, is an experienced trade union bureaucrat. He trained to be a banker and throughout the 1980s was union representative at the Leonberger Building Society. He became a trade union secretary in 1991 and is currently a full-time Verdi official in Baden-Württemberg.

The party congress has resolved nothing for the Left Party. The internal conflicts intensify as the crisis deepens. A split is quite possible.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to write off the party prematurely. As the crisis develops, the ruling class may feel obliged to breathe new life into the organization. The sister party of the Left Party in Greece, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), also went through a severe crisis and split before it was propped up by the media and gained political support following the collapse of the social democratic PASOK. Now it stands ready to take power following elections later this month and enforce austerity measures dictated by the international banks against the Greek population.



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