German Left Party moves further to the right

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One week ago German Left Party officials met in Elgersburg in the state of Thüringia. The result was a programmatic document that leaves nothing to the imagination. The Left Party is offering to support the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens in the formation of a government which more consistently represents the interests of German big business at home and abroad than the current government headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel.

What is striking about the "Building blocks for a social-ecological recovery program", presented to the press last week by party co-chairs Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, is its complete abandonment of the socialist phraseology the Left Party usually employs. One searches in vain for terms such as "socialism" or even "capitalism". Instead, it talks about a "crisis of European financial relations", which the Left Party wants to overcome with a bundle of economic stimulus measures.

The Left Party accuses Chancellor Angela Merkel of placing too much emphasis on cuts and austerity measures, which are stifling recovery. But the Left Party agrees with Merkel and all the other parties in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) that Germany's task is to preserve the European Union and recast it in Germany's interests. The document reads: "Germany, as the largest economy in the euro zone, and also in its enlightened self-interest, has a responsibility as the locomotive for a European renaissance to actively promote economic growth".

"Enlightened self-interest", "locomotive", "largest economy of the euro zone"—these are catchphrases understood by every banker, employer and bourgeois politician. They signal that the Left Party supports the interests of German business and defends them against both international rivals and the working class.

Like the leading Green politician Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the Left Party regards the crisis as an opportunity for Germany to remake Europe anew. "In history, whenever crisis management was addressed courageously and with a formative hand, upheavals resulted in necessary reforms", ??reads the next sentence.

Viewed purely economically, the growth measures proposed by the Left Party are laughable. Given the scale of the economic crisis, they are a drop in the ocean. They can also be found in similar forms in the programs of all the other parties and have also partially been realised. Such measures include the cash-for-clunkers auto scrappage premium, which the Left Party now wants to also extend to old washing machines and fridges; special regulations for the easy introduction of short-time working, which the Left Party wants reintroduced; and a program of state support for renovating buildings to achieve greater energy efficiency.

The experience in several of Germany's *Länder* (states) has shown that such demands are not meant to be taken literally. The Left Party has always dropped election promises that place a burden on the budget whenever it takes on government responsibility.

The Left Party's "building blocks" for economic growth are not motivated by economics but by political considerations. They are aimed at the middle-class clientele of the Greens and SPD and are meant to make the Left Party palatable to them as a coalition partner.

The proposal to place solar cells on the roofs of all official buildings could also be found in the Green Party's election manifesto. The same applies to the demand for a car-sharing premium to reward those who forgo ownership of a private vehicle. At the same time, the Left Party does not address the issue of the consequences of such measures for jobs in the auto industry.

The party's proposal to halt the provision of meals to schools and kindergartens by private catering firms and establish in-house kitchens, with a nationwide annual subsidy of €5 billion, is largely aimed at a middle-class clientele. It is completely cynical, because the Left Party has systematically abolished in-house kitchens in schools and kindergartens in states where it held power in recent years.

The Left Party's "building blocks" pose no threat to the banks and financial markets, which are imposing their

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diktat throughout Europe. On the contrary, the main beneficiary of the “incentives” that the Left Party aims to stimulate would be the banks, hedge funds and other financial investors. To conceal this fraud, the Left Party is calling for the “reintroduction of a moderate property tax of one percent” of assets in excess of half a million euros. The rich would easily get over this very moderate imposition.

The Left Party's document represents a turn to the right. Six months after Kipping and Riexinger took over the party chair, amid a fierce faction fight, the party’s orientation is clear.

At the time of its formation, the Left Party sought to pose as an opponent of welfare cuts. It aimed to appeal to those moving away from the SPD due to the latter's role in introducing punitive welfare and labour “reforms” like the Hartz laws and Agenda 2010. The Left Party sought to prevent workers from being radicalised and turning to a revolutionary perspective.

Oskar Lafontaine was the main representative of this line. As a former SPD chairman and long-time mayor and state premier in the crisis-ridden Saarland, he had considerable experience in suppressing social tensions. He was able to harness support from a group of experienced trade union bureaucrats and pseudo-left groups such as *Sozialistische Alternative* (SAV, the German section of the Committee for a Workers International, linked to Britain’s Socialist Party) and Marx21 (the German satellite of the International Socialist Tendency, linked to Britain’s SWP).

At the other pole of the party stood communal office holders and state premiers from the former East Germany, who were busy forcing austerity measures against an increasingly impoverished population, and for whom Lafontaine's populist rhetoric went too far.

After some initial electoral successes—in the 2009 Bundestag elections, the party won 12 percent of the vote and also entered several state legislatures in West Germany—the Left Party began to suffer losses. The gulf between its left phrases and right-wing policies could no longer be hidden from voters. In addition support for the Greens soared in 2011, and a federal coalition of the SPD and Greens seemed possible, rendering superfluous the support of the Left Party to create a majority.

But since then the economic and social crisis has intensified dramatically. Sections of the ruling class are pushing for an end to the Merkel government, which is increasingly hamstrung on both domestic and foreign policy as a result of internal tensions and disputes. They long for a return of SPD leader Gerhard Schröder's so-called “red-green” coalition, which was more successful in pushing through social cuts than any other government. But at present, neither a Christian Democrat-Free Democratic Party nor a SPD-Green coalition seems likely to win a majority in the 2013 federal elections. Therefore the Left Party is needed once again.

The Left Party is no longer satisfied with merely keeping social discontent under control but is pushing to be included in the federal government. It is no longer restricting itself to social demagogy but is actively canvasing support from better off layers of the middle class.

The party had already agreed to drop its slogan calling for an end to the Hartz laws. Party chair Kipping told the political magazine *Cicero* that the Left Party still wanted to “win back social groups in precarious circumstances” and to integrate them while, at the same time, it sought to begin “a targeted discussion with the creative-ecological milieu along with left populism”.

Ever since Kipping and the Stuttgart union functionary Bernd Riexinger became co-chairs, the Left Party has been clearly working towards a coalition with the SPD and Greens. Even when the SPD chose arch right-winger Peer Steinbrück as its lead candidate for chancellor, Left Party representatives continued to stress they were still seeking collaboration with the SPD. It was a matter of content, not personalities, they said.

The Left Party is moving to the right in response to the extreme intensification of class antagonisms throughout Europe. In the face of the historic scale of the attacks by the financial elite on all the social rights of European workers, the Left Party is no longer limiting itself to merely strangling social resistance; it is preparing to implement the next round of attacks in Agenda 2020 and through new Hartz laws.

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