

Germany's Left Party defends the European Union

Christoph Dreier
2 December 2013

The Left Party's executive discussed a draft program for the European elections over the weekend of November 23-24. The document, which was adopted as the executive's draft for the party's congress in February by 18 votes to 11 with several amendments, contains a vehement defence of the European Union (EU) and its bailout regime.

This is the Left Party's response to rising opposition to the EU and its brutal austerity dictates across Europe. As the EU becomes ever more discredited in the eyes of millions of workers, the Left Party is stepping forward to defend not only the EU, but also the its reactionary bailouts.

The program begins by explicitly acknowledging widespread popular opposition to the EU: "Increasing numbers of people associate 'Europe' with costs, dictates and bureaucracy. The populations of the so-called crisis states confront the European Union, and often German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as entities that are cutting social welfare, wages, pensions and the healthcare system. They associate 'Europe' with social and economic devastation."

The Left Party's answer is to glorify the EU and its institutions, portraying them as progressive. "Together with social movements, trade unions and other left parties, we argue for a new and different European Union," its draft states. By a "new EU," the Left Party essentially means the existing one, based on the Maastricht Treaty—to which the Left Party goes on to suggest a few cosmetic changes.

The Left Party executive consequently demands greater decision-making powers for the European parliament and the right to initiate legislation instead of the council. A "progressive clause" should be inserted into EU treaties, they write, to secure things like independent collective bargaining. On this basis, a "democratic," "social," and "peaceful" Europe could emerge, they claim.

Such a portrayal of the EU is absurd. Since its founding in 1992, the EU has sought to eliminate all barriers to maximising profits of banks and major corporations, while attacking workers' democratic and social rights. In the 1990s, the EU organised the social decimation of Eastern Europe. The region's low wages were then systematically used to attack living standards across the continent.

The EU intensified this course with the onset of the financial

crisis. In Greece, the so-called

"troika"—the EU Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—have wrought a social catastrophe in defiance of public opinion. Two thirds of young people are out of work, and the average wage has fallen by 40 percent since 2008. Similar conditions can be found in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Ireland.

The Left Party's glorification and defence of this reactionary institution is no misunderstanding. They also defend social cuts in Germany and have implemented them as part of governing coalitions in several state governments. In the draft program, they explicitly accept the EU's bailout regime as "a left way out of the crisis."

The countries burdened with debts through the bank bailouts should remain under the troika's stewardship, according to the draft. Only the conditions tied to these programs should be changed, the draft states. The Left Party absurdly suggests the troika could be convinced to change its policies and oversee cuts to military spending, the nationalisation of failed banks, the defence of social welfare, and the taxing of top earners. These measures should ensure that "the rich participate appropriately in paying for the crisis."

In fact, by defending the bailout, the Left Party is defending the largest redistribution of wealth in the post-war period. The loans from the EU bailout funds serve no other purpose than the repaying of private investors with interest for their toxic assets. Throughout this process, the debt levels of the affected countries have not fallen, but increased massively.

Under the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) alone, €700 billion in public funds were made available to bail out euro zone countries' creditors. In addition, the bailout loans serve as an instrument to abolish any democratic control over national economic policy.

In the first draft of the election statement, discussed by the executive in October, there was not even a mention of a debt haircut for creditors. After internal party criticism, a short paragraph was then added. In it, the Left Party speaks out in favour of a "debt audit" to determine the legitimacy of the debt. If debts prove to be illegitimate, there would have to be "substantial debt relief." The draft offered no indication as to what its criteria for "legitimate" debt would be.

The Left Party is thereby declaring that certain forms of debt are entirely legitimate, while confirming that even debt found to be illegitimate would at least be partially repaid. A haircut for creditors, which they portray as some sort of punishment, is fully in the interests of the creditors and can, as in Greece, even lead to their further enrichment.

The support for the EU's bailout regime is fully in keeping with the Left Party's political line. In October 2008, it voted in favour of the emergency legislation to speed up the bank bailout in parliament—a precondition for rushing the multi-billion bailout package through parliament without any meaningful discussion.

Under the heading “for a peaceful Europe,” the Left Party claims that the EU and its predecessor organisations were designed “to prevent wars and—after the world wars in the 20th century—contribute to peaceful developments within and outside Europe.” The Left Party then argues on this basis for a “new start” to achieve a more peaceful Europe.

In fact, the European Community (EC) was formed as a bulwark against the eastern bloc. After the collapse of the Soviet Union it pursued an increasingly aggressive and expansionist foreign policy, including with military means. At the same time internal national divisions grew. Berlin in particular used the EU to dominate the continent and impose its own economic interests.

The glorification of the federation also serves to cover for the Left Party's right-wing politics. The first draft of the Left Party election program did not rule out European military interventions, but tied them to specific conditions. It stated, “The EU possesses neither the democratic instruments to be capable of leading foreign interventions in line with the will of the European population, nor does it contribute sufficiently to securing peace.”

When several media outlets concluded from this that the Left Party was weakening its previous criticisms of military interventions, the party executive initially backtracked. The daily *Junge Welt* cited a paper from the Left Party's federal business committee, according to which the offending paragraph was the result of an oversight.

Contacted by the WSWs, Left Party press spokesman Alexander Fischer did not wish to make any further comment.

Then, in the second draft, it stated: “The EU is acting with increased military means, which are not sufficiently based on human rights. It competes with the United Nations and undermines its legitimacy.” This formulation implies that the use of military force is justified if it has the legitimization of human rights offered by the UN—as in the Afghan war.

With this position, the executive is drawing on a discussion which has been taking place inside the Left Party for several months. Significant sections of the party leadership, including parliamentary leader Gregor Gysi and foreign affairs spokesman Paul Schäfer, have repeatedly called for the party to agree to foreign interventions by the German army.

They are seeking to establish the Left Party as a reliable coalition partner on the federal level and remind the ruling elite that when in government, the Left Party has thrown every election promise overboard.

Leading Left Party representatives have criticized such an open militarist policy and defence of the EU, fearing that the Left Party will continue to lose influence if it advances such militarist and anti-social positions. However, what underlies their critique of the draft program is their overt nationalism.

Andreas Wehr, a deputy in the European parliament, wrote in *Junge Welt* that the main focus of the party should not be on Europe. “There are strong trade unions and left parties capable of action only on the national level. Only here do media outlets exist which make public debate over the course of a country possible. There is none of this in the EU.”

Eleven deputies and members of the executive, including Wolfgang Gehrcke and Sevim Dagdelen, stated that the draft took an overly European approach. It was difficult to read this as a defence of the German constitution and democratic rights, the basis for which was democratic sovereignty, they stated.

Such nationalist positions are by no means new in the Left Party. Former Left Party chairman Oscar Lafontaine called in May this year for the indebted countries of southern Europe to leave the euro, so that wages there could drop by between 20 and 30 percent. At the same time, the party's deputy chairwoman Sarah Wagenknecht praised the European policies of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany, and a few weeks later polemicised against training of unemployed youth from other European countries in Germany.

With their campaign for national sovereignty, this faction of the Left Party is seeking another way to politically disarm the workers and tie them to the state, trade unions and the bourgeois parties. They are drawing on the arguments of far-right tendencies and articulate a growing euro-scepticism within layers of the German ruling class. This finds a reflection in the Left Party as it does in every other bourgeois tendency.

Both factions of the Left Party represent varieties of right-wing, bourgeois politics. To defend their interests, workers must reject this party and oppose the European Union and the growing nationalism encouraged by the EU. Working people require their own independent perspective: the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact