

How the German Left Party defends the European Union

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At its party congress in Hamburg next weekend, the Left Party will adopt its European election manifesto. Although popular opposition to the European Union is widespread and growing, the Left Party is eager to portray itself as a loyal defender of the EU.

This question has caused some controversy in the run-up to the congress. The preamble to the original draft manifesto contained a passage describing the EU as a “neo-liberal, militaristic and largely undemocratic power”. When the media seized on this formulation and cited it as proof of an evidently anti-EU attitude on the part of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, leader of the party’s parliamentary group, distanced himself from it and promised that the party congress would change it.

Last Saturday, anticipating the congress, the party leadership deleted the passage from the draft with only one vote against and five abstentions. According to press reports, the party leadership wants to prevent a substantial debate about the character of the EU from developing at the congress.

“We say a very clear ‘yes’ to Europe and link this to constructive criticism of the EU,” Party Chair Katja Kipping said in explaining the deletion of the passage. Deputy Chair Sahra Wagenknecht, who originally supported the controversial formulation, has since declared the passage to be expendable.

The episode is symptomatic of the Left Party. The neo-liberal, militaristic and undemocratic nature of the EU is undeniable. Officials from Brussels, who lack any democratic legitimacy, dictate austerity programmes to Greece and other countries, which mean abject misery for millions. In the imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East, the EU is playing a leading role.

Nevertheless, the Left Party is clearly denying the obvious and declaring unconditional support for the

EU. The “constructive criticism” (Kipping) merely serves to obscure this.

All the various wings of the party are in agreement on this question. No one in the Left Party rejects the EU or calls for its abolition. The internal party dispute revolves around phrases, not content.

While one wing calls for a “change” in the EU, another calls for a “new beginning”. What concerns them all is how best to suppress the growing opposition to the EU. The right wing of the party fears that too sharp a criticism of the EU will decrease the chances of participating in government. The nominal “left” wing believes the party will lose all influence if it does not verbally dissociate itself from the EU.

A conference of the party’s Hesse state association on February 1 in Frankfurt, which discussed the European election program, shows this very clearly. Pseudo-left currents such as Marx21, SDS and Socialist Left are particularly well represented in the party’s Hesse association. One of the three members of the federal parliament from Hesse, Christine Buchholz, and one of the six members of the state legislature, Janine Wissler, are members of Marx21.

The conference concentrated on building a bridge for the party executive and sought to reconcile the various wings. It adopted an alternative formulation for the preamble to the European election manifesto in which the disputed passage about the militaristic and undemocratic character of the EU was excised. After a few critical paragraphs, the version drafted in Hesse, like that of the national leadership, calls for the reform of the EU and thus accepts its continued existence.

In her introduction to the proposed draft from Hesse, Janine Wissler said the allegation that the Left Party was hostile to Europe was a “bad joke”. However, it was necessary to succinctly characterise the EU for the

public, she said. One had to clearly see, she explained, that disappointment over the EU was strengthening the far right.

The main speaker in Frankfurt was Gabi Zimmer, chair of the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in the European Parliament. In her youth, she was a member of the Stalinist state party in East Germany, and from 2000 to 2003 was chair of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the predecessor of the Left Party. She freely admits her support for the EU. “We fight for this European Union,” she declared.

Zimmer called for the unity of the European Left and cooperation with the Social Democrats and Greens. Especially when it comes to Europe, there should be no internal quarrels weakening the European Left, because the work in the EU bodies was already difficult enough, she said. And since the GUE/NGL includes just 35 deputies from 14 countries, candidates must be prepared to engage with the full spectrum, including Greens, social democrats, and others.

The parties listed by Zimmer are fully committed to the EU’s policies of austerity and militarism, and, like the French Socialist Party, are implementing them wherever they are in government. Even within the GUE/NGL, there are parties, such as the Cypriot AKEL and the French Communist Party, which have long been involved in governments that support the EU unconditionally. Zimmer’s call for unity and cooperation with such parties refutes her own assertion that she wants to “change” the EU.

The leading candidate of the European Left in the European elections, SYRIZA Chairman Alexis Tsipras from Greece, is also committed to the EU. He has travelled several times to Washington and Berlin to assure those in power that they have nothing to fear from SYRIZA, should it take over the government in Athens.

In Frankfurt, many speakers justified support for the European Union by saying that rejection of the EU provided grist for the mill of the far right and racists. This stands reality on its head. Right-wing parties are able to profit from the growing popular opposition to the EU because they meet no opposition from the nominal left. Support for the EU by the Left Party and its European allies is grist for the mill of the right-wing demagogues.

The defence of the EU by the Left Party is no coincidence. It has deep social roots. In an earlier article on this topic, the WSWS wrote: “The Left Party does not defend the EU because it has illusions in its ability to be reformed, but because it represents the same social interests as the EU.”

The Left Party emerged from the Stalinist state party in East Germany and a wing of Social Democracy in West Germany, both of which have for decades suppressed the class struggle in the name of “social peace”. The Left Party represents the interests of wealthy layers around the trade unions and the state apparatus who see a mobilization of the working class as a threat to their own privileges.

The only party that is standing in the European elections in Germany to mobilize the working class against the EU on the basis of a socialist programme is the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG--Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

“We seek to develop a mass political and social movement of the European working class against big business, its parties and its governments”, the joint statement on the European elections of the PSG and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Britain states. “We reject the European Union and all of its undemocratic institutions, including the European Parliament... Our aim is the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe. Only the formation of workers’ governments in every country and the unification of Europe on a socialist basis can prevent the decline of Europe into nationalism and war, and create the conditions for utilising and developing its extensive resources and productive forces in the interests of society as a whole.”



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