

German Left Party leader rails against refugees

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Just days after Germany's grand coalition government moved to curtail the right to asylum for refugees, figures in the Left Party demanded even more far-reaching measures. Last Monday the founding father and long-time chairman of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, published a statement in which he calls for "the number of refugees granted protection in Germany to be limited by fixed quotas in Europe and then allow those accepted to bring their spouse and children after them."

"A steadily increasing influx" would "inevitably result in limiting the subsequent immigration of family members," Lafontaine writes, before going on to criticise the German government from the right. "Up to now German chancellor Angela Merkel has failed to make a clear statement. According to leading politicians in Europe, she is therefore in part responsible for the ever-increasing number of refugees and the strengthening of right-wing parties in Europe."

Lafontaine's statements are both reactionary and misleading. Merkel is not "in part responsible for the ever rising numbers of refugees" because she has refrained from introducing fixed quotas for refugees (so far), but rather because she, and the entire government, support Western war policy in the Middle East, Africa and Afghanistan, which has laid waste to entire countries and forced tens of millions to flee their homes.

With his demand for "quotas," Lafontaine is lining up with far right-wing forces in German political circles and the media calling for Merkel to adopt more aggressive measures against refugees. Leading the pack in this regard is Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, who has repeatedly agitated against refugees and demands tighter asylum laws. Significantly, he has also called, alongside other right-wingers inside his party, for the introduction of "quotas," i.e. a strict limit on the number of refugees.

Lafontaine's entire line of argument is populist to the core. He seeks to play off the poorest strata of society

against migrants, while directing a few lame jibes at millionaires, combined with appeals to the state. He writes: "The costs should not be carried by those already at a disadvantage, namely low-income earners, the unemployed, pensioners and families. It is impermissible for cuts to be made in schools, the social sphere, public services and the police, while Merkel, Gabriel and co refuse to involve millionaires in the financing."

Lafontaine's right wing slogans are not some temporary lapse on his part. They arise directly from the nationalist, pro-capitalist and imperialist orientation of his party. This orientation is epitomized in the figure of Lafontaine, a former chairman of the SPD and former SPD Finance Minister. In fact, Oskar Lafontaine is one of the pioneers of Germany's reactionary refugee policy.

In the early 1990s, Lafontaine, while in the office of premier of the state of Saarland, introduced "emergency measures" as part of a nationwide campaign against refugees. These "measures" included the introduction of camps, collective catering and the provision of basic necessities instead of direct financial assistance. He also campaigned for a new federal ordinance that would deny asylum to refugees if it could be established that "according to the general consensus there is no political persecution" in their homeland.

Lafontaine was considered a hardliner in refugee policy and was determined to bring the entire SPD into line. When in August 1990 the North Rhine-Westphalian premier and later federal president Johannes Rau (SPD) adopted Lafontaine's course, *Der Spiegel* commented: "The North Rhine-Westphalia SPD government wants to tighten up asylum law—in keeping with the chancellor candidate Oskar Lafontaine."

In August 1992 Lafontaine, together with the then SPD chairman Björn Engholm, was the architect of the so-called "Petersburg Turn", which resulted in the de facto abolition of the right to asylum in the so-called asylum

compromise. A key element of the “compromise” was the introduction of the category of a “safe third country.” For the first time, asylum seekers from “safe third countries” could be rejected without further consideration—a practice that is now commonplace: Lafontaine spoke at the time of “a real step forward.”

After his resignation from the SPD chairmanship and resignation from the SPD Lafontaine remained true to his course. In 2004, he was one of a minority who supported the controversial plans by Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD), to set up detention centers for refugees in Africa. Writing in the yellow press *Bild* daily, Lafontaine used a formulation which is common coin amongst far rightists today: Under “the 15 percent” of refugees who left Africa, were “not the weak, the old, the sick and orphaned children. There are usually the healthy, the strong who want to come to Europe to live better,” Lafontaine wrote.

In 2005 Lafontaine then deliberately stoked up sentiment against “foreign workers”. It was the duty of the state “to prevent fathers of families and women becoming unemployed because foreign workers on low wages take away their jobs,” he said during an infamous speech at a rally in Chemnitz.

Ten years ago the Left Party still muttered some criticisms of Lafontaine’s position, but its current program is based on a kind of “Petersburg Turn 2.0”. After the party lined up last year behind the foreign policy of the government, it is showing its true colours on the refugee question. Just days before the release of Lafontaine’s statement, the Left Party state government in Thuringia announced its plans to deport thousands of refugees by the end of the year and create a hub for mass deportations for the entire Federal Republic.



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