

Germany: How the pseudo-left justify the Left Party's shift to the right

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The Left Party has responded to the rise of the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its own losses in March's state elections with a further shift to the right. While a faction surrounding Sahra Wagenknecht and Oskar Lafontaine have adopted the AfD's xenophobic propaganda, others, like Gregor Gysi and party co-chair Katja Kipping, are appealing for broad governing coalitions including the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The Left Party is thereby continuing the same political course which is responsible for the rise of the far right. Their growing influence is the outcome of the rightward shift of all established parties, including the Left Party. The restriction of the right to asylum by the federal government, the increasingly strict deportation policy implemented by all state governments, and the Islamophobic propaganda rife in the media serve as free electoral advertising for the AfD. At the same time, the coming together of all the established parties around a programme of social welfare cuts, layoffs and other austerity measures has enabled the AfD to present itself as an opposition to the political establishment.

The fact that the Left Party is responding to the AfD's rise with a further shift to the right stems from the bourgeois character of the party. Irrespective of its name and occasional radical rhetoric, it unflinchingly defends the power and property relations upon which the capitalist system is based. It is less concerned by the AfD's right-wing programme, with which it largely agrees, than with the breakdown of the mechanisms which in the past served to dampen the class struggle and bolster capitalist rule.

In March's state elections, not only did the AfD increase its support, but the Social Democrats (SPD) suffered an electoral debacle. In two states, Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, the SPD struggled to surpass 10 percent of the vote and finished behind the AfD. Since the foundation of the Federal Republic, the SPD has played a key role in stabilising capitalist rule. It used its support among workers and its close ties to the trade unions to suppress the class struggle. In 1999, Oskar Lafontaine gave up his position as SPD chairman because he was convinced that the party could no longer fulfill this role due to chancellor Gerhard Schröder's right-wing policies.

The Left Party, which Lafontaine later took over, pursued the goal of creating new majorities for the SPD by entering coalition governments. It achieved this goal in several former East German states, and in Thuringia with the support of the Greens. But on a federal level this prospect has faded away. While the SPD has collapsed, the Greens are orienting towards the CDU. The Left Party has responded by embracing the CDU, or by adopting the AfD's slogans.

There is no limit to this right-wing development. This is shown by developments in Greece, where Syriza, the Left Party's sister party, concluded immediately after its electoral victory last year a coalition with the Independent Greeks (Anel), a group just as right-wing as the AfD. Since then, the government of Alexis Tsipras has enforced one brutal austerity package after another and assumed the role of border and prison

guard against refugees. This has not prevented the Left Party from continuing to collaborate closely with Syriza.

Marx 21 and SAV

The Left Party's crisis has mobilized the pseudo-left groups that operate within the party or in its environs. They have taken on the task of justifying and defending its shift to the right. The Left Party's organ, *Neues Deutschland*, has opened its pages for this purpose. In a dossier with the misleading title "Strategies against the trend to the right," they speak at length alongside Left Party co-chairs Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, ND editor Tom Strohshneider, and other prominent party figures.

Alongside the Marx 21 and Socialist Alternative (SAV) tendencies, which have long worked within the Left Party, the group Revolutionary Internationalist Organisation (RIO), which formally remains outside the Left Party, is also participating in the debate. In the name of a "broad alliance against the right," all three groups advocate even closer collaboration than in the past with the SPD, the Greens, the CDU and even the Christian Social Union (CSU). They also intend to include the trade unions, the church and other reliable props of the capitalist system in their "broad alliance."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has long demonstrated that these groups are hostile to the class struggle, socialism and Marxism, and are making use of "populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class." This is being confirmed once again.

Their "broad alliance" with individuals and organisations responsible for ruthless attacks on the working class is not directed against the AfD, but against an independent movement of the working class that calls the capitalist system into question. They fear that the anger against the right, social inequality, anti-refugee agitation and the preparations for war will undermine the control of the SPD, Left Party and trade union bureaucracy and turn in a socialist direction.

For Marx 21 (linked to the International Socialist Tendency) such a "broad alliance" can never be broad enough. The appeal initiated by them, "stand up against racism," is not only supported by the leadership of the Left Party, but also by the leaders of the Greens, top SPD politicians and trade union officials. Signatories to the declaration include SPD general secretary Katarina Barley and SPD minister of family affairs Manuela Schwesig.

Marx 21 describes this as "unity in action" and firmly attacks anyone who criticises "the participation of the SPD in such unity in action by referring to its leadership's central role in the implementation of neoliberal policies and the promotion of racism." Whoever resists this

“broad unity in action against the AfD” runs the risk of becoming the “tragic follower of the representatives ‘of the social fascism’ theory of the Stalinised KPD,” they write. (1)

Marx 21 does not explain how the AfD is to be combatted in cooperation with an SPD politician who, as a member of the federal government, bears full responsibility for its inhumane refugee policy. But it is clear that the group’s aim is to defend the SPD against criticism and provide it with an “anti-racist” fig leaf.

Marx 21 even wants to bring Horst Seehofer and the CSU into its “broad alliance.” This is because, according to their justification, “Seehofer is not building a mass racist movement on the streets which can become the springboard for the formation of a new fascist right.” (2) It must be assumed that Marx 21 would also be prepared to conclude a “broad alliance” with the AfD, if the NPD or another neofascist party would win support in a future election.

The SAV, the German section of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), also advocates “broad alliances,” but warns against “political arbitrariness.” They fear that such alliances will be too quickly discredited if they “include those responsible for austerity policies, social cuts, a lack of housing and state-sponsored racism.” (3) Less prominent representatives of these parties are, however, welcome. “Our critique of pursuing alliances with bourgeois parties is by no means directed against the participation of individual members or whole groups of SPD or Greens in such practical alliances.” (4)

Revolutionary Internationalist Organisation

RIO has assumed the task of justifying this right-wing policy with citations from Leon Trotsky torn out of context. The contribution in *Neues Deutschland* from RIO member Wladek Flakin is titled “What would Trotsky say?” and is emblazoned with a portrait of Trotsky. It culminates in the demand for “a united front as broad as possible, in which everyone is welcome without exception.” (5) Flakin means this quite literally. He explicitly names deputy chancellor and SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel and family affairs minister Schwesig as partners in “joint action” against the AfD.

Flakin’s attempt to use Trotsky to justify alliances with Gabriel, Schwesig and “everyone without exception” is a historical falsification of the worst kind. Whoever is even slightly familiar with his biography knows that Trotsky devoted his entire life to the task of building an independent revolutionary movement of the working class. The struggle against the political subordination of the working class to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies runs through his entire political activity, from the time he joined the Russian Social Democracy as a student to the founding of the Fourth International shortly prior to his assassination.

His irreconcilable opposition to the provisional government of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries made Trotsky the closest collaborator of Lenin in the 1917 October revolution. The political independence of the working class was also a crucial question in the fight against the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International and its terrible consequences—against the subordination of the British Communist Party to the trade unions in 1926, of the Chinese Communist Party to the Kuomintang in 1927 and of the French and Spanish communist parties to the popular front in the 1930s.

Trotsky’s struggle against the rise of fascism in Germany, upon which Flakin bases his argument, was in line with this. Trotsky understood very well that concealed behind the radical left-wing rhetoric of KPD leader Thälmann and Stalin were passive fatalism and defeatism. The KPD denounced the SPD as “social fascists” and “twin brothers of the Nazis,”

lowering themselves to such shameful acts as the support of a Nazi referendum against the SPD government in Prussia, while refusing to mobilize the entire working class against fascism.

Under conditions where the Nazis grew rapidly and it was only a question of months before they made a grab for power and violently destroyed the workers’ movement, Trotsky urged a united front of both mass workers’ parties, the SPD and KPD. He rejected the demand for a “united front from below,” which the KPD sometimes demagogically raised, because at the time the KPD and SPD both had hundreds of thousands of members and millions of voters from the working class behind them. “The overwhelming majority of the Social Democratic workers will fight against the fascists, but—for the present at least—only together with their organizations,” Trotsky wrote. “This stage cannot be skipped.” (6)

However, Trotsky insisted upon restricting the united front to practical questions of defence and resisting the danger posed by fascism. He opposed mixing political banners and the abandonment of political critiques. The united front was a tactic aimed at uniting the working class in the process of resisting fascism, to overcome the fatalism of the Communist Party, whose leaders considered “the fascist victory as inevitable,” and to break the Social Democratic workers from the influence of their leaders, who, as Trotsky wrote, “in the final analysis prefer fascism to communism.”

“The front must now be directed against fascism,” Trotsky stated. “And this common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat, must be utilized in the struggle against the Social Democracy, directed as a flank attack, but no less effective for all that.”

The KPD’s refusal to advocate a united front ultimately made Hitler’s victory possible.

Flakin’s attempt to justify the shabby political manoeuvres of the Left Party in the name of Trotsky’s united front policy exposes him as a cynical con-man. “The united front policy,” he writes, is “the correct approach for revolutionaries today in dealing with the struggle against the right and the traditional, right-wing social democracy (SPD), and the new, more left social democracy (Left Party).”

While Trotsky fought to free the working class from the crippling influence of the SPD, Flakin is attempting to strengthen the bureaucratic apparatuses of the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions, which hardly have any influence left among the workers and are viewed by them with a mixture of disgust and hatred. He is aware that the “SPD of today and the SPD then cannot be compared” and that “the Left Party has still less in common with the KPD.” In spite of this, he misuses Trotsky to justify alliances with these right-wing, bourgeois parties.

In contrast to the 1930s, the problem today is not that leaders of mass parties have betrayed workers who trust them. Today’s SPD and Left Party are not workers’ parties, but purely bourgeois parties, whose members come overwhelmingly from the middle class and the bourgeoisie.

The same applies to the trade unions. They are no longer reformist organisations, which represent their members at least on day-to-day issues, but a factory police force organising layoffs and wage cuts in the interests of the corporations and suppressing social struggles. The decades-long domination of the workers’ movement by these right-wing, bureaucratic organisations has created a political vacuum that is being exploited by the AfD and other right-wing parties.

Under these conditions, only an independent political movement of the working class can effectively counter the danger of the right. It must be an internationalist and socialist movement, combining the fight against the rise of the right with the struggles against war, dictatorship, social attacks and capitalism. Such a movement would rapidly cut the ground from under the feet of the right-wing demagogues and become a beacon for widespread social dissatisfaction. Such a movement can only be built in

an irreconcilable political and ideological offensive against the Social Democrats, the Left Party and their pseudo-left defenders.

Flakin is vehemently opposed to this. Instead, he wants to build “unity in action” with Gabriel, Schwesig and, as he writes on the basis of a citation from Trotsky torn entirely out of context, “the devil and his grandmother.” Flakin fails to inform us what kind of anti-fascist actions he plans to organise jointly with Gabriel, the German economy minister, who admires Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, promotes militarism and war and discusses with Pegida.

The “broad alliances,” “action fronts” and “united fronts” propagated by RIO, Marx 21 and SAV with all possible bourgeois forces are a trap for the working class and the surest way to further accelerate the strengthening of the far right.

The origins of the RIO

The German group RIO was relatively recently founded, but draws on a long tradition of justifying right-wing politics with left-wing jargon and false references to Trotsky. Historically, it is based on two tendencies which broke with the Fourth International and specialised in providing anti-Communism and nationalism with a pseudo-left cover.

The first tendency is that of the state capitalists. They trace their origins to Tony Cliff, who broke with Trotskyism in the late 1940s and described the Soviet Union as state capitalist. This was not merely an abstract question of terminology. The Fourth International defended the Soviet Union against attack from imperialism in spite of its Stalinist degeneration, because the property relations achieved through the October revolution represented progress. It defined the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state.”

Cliff’s theory of state capitalism meant a capitulation to imperialism under conditions of the beginning of the Cold War. It was a form of anti-Communism concealed behind left phrases. This was shown as early as 1950, when the state capitalists refused to defend the Soviet Union and China against the invasion of Korea by the United States.

Over the years, the state capitalists went through a series of splits. Among opportunist groups whose politics are based on adapting to the political shifts within different factions of the bourgeoisie, this is unavoidable. However, this did not change anything about their fundamental political orientation. RIO, like Marx 21, is the product of a split within this state capitalist tendency. Its predecessors include the Workers Power Group (GAM), which expressed its opposition to Trotskyism with the demand for a fifth international.

The second tendency upon which RIO is based is Morenoism. In 2011, RIO joined the Trotskyist Faction-Fourth International (FT-CI), within which a leading role is played by the Argentinian Socialist Workers Party (PTS). The PTS was created in 1988 as one of the successor parties to Nahuel Moreno’s Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS).

Moreno had, like Cliff, transformed himself into a vehement opponent of the Fourth International in the post-war period. He adapted to bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalism in Latin America and switched his support between its protagonists, from Juan Peron in Argentina to Fidel Castro in Cuba. In its essence, Morenoism was bourgeois nationalism clad in a pseudo-Marxist language.

The working class paid a heavy price with a series of terrible defeats produced by this right-wing tradition, upon which Flakin now bases himself with his attempts to justify the Left Party’s right-wing manoeuvres by referring to Trotsky. Workers and youth who genuinely want to combat the AfD must learn to distinguish between this pseudo-left demagoguery and real socialist politics.

References

- [1] <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1006070.den-keil-ansetzen.html>
[2] <https://www.marx21.de/afd-strategien-gegen-die-rechte-gefahr/>
[3] <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1003002.breite-buendnisse-aber-keine-politische-beliebigkeit.html>
[4] <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1007468.mit-rotgruen-gegen-rassisten.html>
[5] <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1008551.was-wuerde-trotzki-tun.html>
[6] This citation, and the one which follows, is taken from Trotsky’s article “For a United Front against Fascism, published in the Militant on 9 January, 1932. Flakin also cites from this work, but rips the quotations out of context.



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