

German Left Party leader demands tougher deportation policy

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In an interview with the conservative *Die Welt* newspaper, joint founder of the Left Party Oscar Lafontaine spoke out in favour of a stricter deportation policy.

“Many states rightly rely on voluntary repatriation and offer assistance. But the state must ultimately be able to decide who it accepts. That is of course the basis of the state order,” stated Lafontaine, who will run as the Left Party’s leading candidate in state elections in Saarland at the end of March. “Whoever has crossed the border illegally should be given the option of voluntarily returning. If they do not accept this offer, deportation is all that is left. The state governments in which the Left Party is involved also see things this way.”

In common with representatives of the far right, Lafontaine seeks to invoke social issues in his attacks on refugees, the majority of whom have fled from war zones in the Middle East and North Africa. He promotes nationalism, attacks globalisation from the right and attempts to play off the poorest sections of the population against immigrants.

“We cannot afford to leave it to right-wing parties to talk about the problems of wage and rent competition,” the Left Party politician said. Businessmen support open borders to secure labour power from developing countries and “intensify wage competition by means of increased migration.” He added that the immigration question was “above all a social issue—for those who come here and those already living here.” He went on to cite sociologist Colin Crouch, who had “pointed out that the call for open borders [is] a central demand of neoliberalism.”

Lafontaine’s line of argument is reactionary and cynical. For one thing, the Left Party, as a party of government, is responsible for much of the social

misery he now blames on immigration, particularly in the eastern German states where workers have been driven to desperation. Currently the party is in government in the eastern states of Brandenburg, Thuringia and Berlin. Secondly, the fact it poses as a “left” party, while implementing right-wing, anti-working class policies, creates the political frustration which the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and others exploit.

We noted in a previous article that Lafontaine’s right-wing slogans come as no surprise. They arise directly out of his party’s orientation, which defends capitalism and German imperialism. Hardly anyone else embodies this better than the former Social Democratic Party chairman and federal Finance Minister. A brief review is enough to show that Lafontaine has been one of the leading trailblazers for an anti-refugee policy over the past 25 years.

In the early 1990s, as Minister President in Saarland, he adopted “immediate measures” including the introduction of mass detention camps, communal caring facilities and benefits in kind. At the same time, he pushed for new legislation from the German government, which would deny the guarantee of asylum to those coming from countries where “according to general opinion, no political persecution is taking place.”

Lafontaine was seen within the SPD at the time as a hardliner on refugee policy. He saw his task as one of imposing his line on the entire party. When in August 1990 then-minister president of North Rhine-Westphalia and future German President Johannes Rau (SPD) publicly backed Lafontaine, *Der Spiegel* wrote, “North Rhine-Westphalia’s SPD government intends to restrict the right to asylum—entirely in the spirit of Chancellor candidate Oscar Lafontaine.”

Then in August 1992, Lafontaine enforced, together with then SPD chair Björn Engholm, the so-called “Petersburg Turn,” which marked the repositioning of the SPD on refugee and foreign policy, including among other things the virtual abolition of the right to asylum through a so-called asylum compromise. A central element of this was so-called third-state regulations. These laid the basis for the current mass deportations: asylum seekers from what are designated secure third states could be rejected without any further review. Lafontaine described this as a “real step forward.”

After his resignation as SPD chair and departure from the party, Lafontaine stuck to the same line. In 2004, he was among the few who supported the controversial plans of Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) to establish detention centres for refugees in Africa. At the time, Lafontaine formulated in the *Bild* newspaper what has become one of the favourite arguments of the far right today. Among “the 15 percent” who leave Africa as refugees, are “not the weak, elderly, sick and children without parents. It is normally the healthy, those capable of achievements who want to get to Europe to live better,” Lafontaine wrote.

In 2005, Lafontaine then deliberately encouraged prejudices against “foreign workers.” The state was obliged “to prevent family fathers and women becoming unemployed while foreign workers take jobs from them with low wages,” he declared in a now infamous speech in Chemnitz.

Over the past two years, Lafontaine and his wife, the parliamentary group leader of the Left Party Sahra Wagenknecht, have repeatedly attacked the refugee policy of Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) from the right. Already in November 2015, Lafontaine appealed for a strict upper limit for refugees. In a statement he demanded the limitation “of refugees being provided protection in Germany by strict quotas in Europe.”

Then at the beginning of this year, Wagenknecht stated that chancellor Angela Merkel was “jointly responsible” for the terrorist attack on a Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin. “There is joint responsibility, but it goes deeper,” said Wagenknecht. “Along with the uncontrolled opening of the borders there is the police cut to the breaking point, with neither the personnel nor the technical equipment appropriate to the danger of the situation.”

The agitation against refugees and the demand for more police are part of the broader campaign by the Left Party to participate in the federal government. Lafontaine noted in *Die Welt* that “the SPD, Greens and Left Party hold the majority in the Bundestag (parliament).” In *Neues Deutschland*, Wagenknecht urged a new, more self-assertive German power politics, “Regardless of what Trump does: we have to intensify the pressure on the German government to break free from subordination to US policy.”



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