

Power struggle in leadership of Germany's Left Party

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In the wake of Germany's federal election, a bitter power struggle has erupted in the leadership of the Left Party. It reached a high point on Tuesday at the first meeting of the party's newly-elected parliamentary group.

The dispute was triggered by the issue of how much influence party leaders Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger should have over the parliamentary group. Several motions were presented at the meeting that would have given the two leaders voting rights in the parliamentary group's executive and additional speaking rights in parliament (the Bundestag). The two parliamentary group leaders, Sahra Wagenknecht and Dietmar Bartsch, categorically rejected this.

Prior to the meeting, Wagenknecht appealed to all parliamentary deputies in a four-page letter accusing Kipping and Riexinger of sabotaging the election campaign, intriguing behind the scenes and bullying. She threatened to resign if they got their way in the parliamentary group.

The two party leaders, Wagenknecht wrote, "never accepted" that the party elected herself and Bartsch as the lead candidates for the federal election campaign. They had "engaged in a penetrating small-scale war" to "undermine" the election "from behind the scenes and by means of intrigue."

"After the federal election—and with complete disregard to the Lower Saxony election campaign—the mounting conflict became an open campaign against the current parliamentary group leadership," Wagenknecht continued. A climate has been created in the party "that no longer permits a normal culture of discussion." Riexinger and Kipping are attempting to "force out" Wagenknecht and Bartsch.

Wagenknecht threatened to withdraw as parliamentary group leader if the group's leadership is

occupied by party executive candidates. She sees "no point in wasting my strength and health in permanent internal trench warfare with two party leaders who are obviously unwilling to cooperate fairly."

After a seven-hour discussion and a meeting between the four, they finally agreed in the evening on a compromise. The party leaders will receive additional speaking rights in the Bundestag, but no voting rights on the parliamentary group executive. Bartsch and Wagenknecht were subsequently re-elected as parliamentary leaders by 80 percent and 75 percent of the votes, respectively.

But the disputes have not been resolved. This is shown by the aggressive tone of Wagenknecht's letter. The Left Party is responding to the federal election and the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) with a sharp shift to the right, which is tearing it apart internally.

The party has played an important role in eastern Germany in suppressing social opposition and, where it has held government posts, imposing its own attacks on the working class. This role has now been called into question. In all five federal states in eastern Germany, the AfD finished ahead of the Left Party. The party lost 400,000 voters to the AfD, above all from workers and the unemployed in their former strongholds in eastern Germany.

The Left Party was able to slightly improve its national result, because the party secured new voters from urban middle-class elements who previously backed the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or Greens. But the main beneficiaries of the major losses suffered by the Christian Democrats and SPD were the AfD and liberal Free Democrats. Both parties overtook the Left Party, which now, instead of being the third largest party, is only the fifth largest in parliament.

Wagenknecht has reacted to the party's collapsing support among workers and in eastern Germany by adopting the AfD's xenophobic programme. She and her husband, the former SPD leader and founder of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, have been pursuing this course for some time.

Shortly after the election, Lafontaine published a comment on Facebook that was printed in the party's newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. He blamed the Left Party's "mistaken refugee policy" for the "lack of support from those on the lower end of the income scale."

In a manner typical of the AfD, Lafontaine sought to play refugees off against the poor. One should "not impose the burden of immigration on those who are already the losers due to increasing inequality in income and wealth," he wrote, as if the refugees are responsible for the attacks on workers carried out by the ruling class, with the Left Party's support, in the interests of the ruling elite!

Stretching his demagoguery to the limit, Lafontaine went on to write that if one looks at "the people fleeing war, hunger and disease," the "violation of the principle of social justice" is even greater. Only a minority manages "to come up with several thousand euros to pay smugglers to come to Europe, and above all Germany." Instead, it would be much better to spend money to "improve conditions in the camps" than to allow refugees into Germany.

This comment provoked a sharp debate in *Neues Deutschland*, as several party leaders distanced themselves from the all too obviously right-wing positions advanced by Lafontaine.

Gregor Gysi, a leading figure for many years within the Left Party, rejected the idea "that one adopts wrong, semi-right-wing positions in the hope of getting votes from more workers and unemployed people... If you want more social justice, you have to struggle against unjustifiable wealth, not against other poor people."

Kipping countered Lafontaine, writing, "Whoever adopts a right-wing position on the refugee issue is risking the Left Party's credibility."

Wagenknecht complained bitterly in her letter to the deputies about this criticism. *Neues Deutschland* publishes online "articles almost daily from party leader Kipping's close political associates, who accuse me of 'semi-right-wing', 'AfD-aligned' or even

'racist' and 'social-nationalist' positions," she wrote. "If anyone who does not share the position 'open borders for everyone right now' is immediately suspected of being a 'racist' and 'semi-Nazi', it is no longer possible to conduct a detailed discussion about a reasonable strategic direction."

The fact that Wagenknecht was elected by 75 percent of the deputies despite this proves that her right-wing, xenophobic positions enjoy broad acceptance within the Left Party.

Kipping and Riexinger are not concerned about declaring their support for refugees. They see the Left Party's future in "cosmopolitan, mobile, often urban milieus" (Kipping) which are chiefly interested in questions of environmental protection, gender politics and similar matters, and would be repelled by too close an identification with the AfD.

Riexinger wrote in *Neues Deutschland*, "The struggle to compete, nationalism and racism dominate the daily thinking of sections of the population, unfortunately also the workers and unemployed." For the Left Party, the issue is therefore to "build bridges with the social democratic and left-green milieu."

For all the factions engaged in the infighting, the responsibility of the Left Party for the AfD's rise remains completely taboo. The Left Party's right-wing policies dressed up in left rhetoric—the social cuts, lay offs and strengthening of the police for which the Left Party is responsible—have created the frustration, anger and outrage which the AfD now seeks to exploit. It is no accident that in Thuringia, the only state with a Left Party Minister President, the AfD led the Left Party by six percentage points in the election.

Notwithstanding the bitter conflicts, all tendencies in the Left Party continue to seek to prevent social opposition from getting out of control and to suppress the class struggle. The Lafontaine-Wagenknecht wing want to do this by adopting AfD slogans, while the Kipping-Riexinger wing seek to mobilise privileged sections of the middle class. The divisions between both factions are fluid.



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