

Germany: Sharp conflicts inside the Left Party

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After the shift to the right in last year's federal elections and the Social Democrats' decision to continue the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats, long-simmering conflicts inside the Left Party have intensified.

At the turn of the year, former SPD chairman and founder of the Left Party Oskar Lafontaine called for a new left-wing movement. "We need an all-embracing left-wing movement, a kind of left people's party, in which the Left Party, parts of the Greens and the SPD can come together," he told newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. "This movement should not only include the classic parties, but also trade unionists, social organizations, scientists, cultural workers and others," he explained his proposal in the *Osnabrücker Zeitung*.

Sahra Wagenknecht, Left Party faction leader in the Bundestag (parliament) and Lafontaine's wife, supports his proposal. "Of course, I want a strong left-wing people's party," she says in the latest issue of *Der Spiegel*. "In the end, it can only work if prominent personalities join in, giving people back the hope that something is moving their way politically." As an example, Wagenknecht pointed to the movement "La France insoumise" of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who "achieved just under 20 percent from a standing start".

The Left Party leadership around Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping, who have been at loggerheads with Wagenknecht for a long time, took the proposal as a declaration of war. Kipping described it as a "project for a schism" and countered with a "Project 15", which aims to increase the party's election results from just under ten to 15 percent. Riexinger said that "no new constructions are necessary, but only a stronger Left Party".

Last weekend, there were two separate Left Party meetings to mark the new year. The party leadership met with representatives from the federal states, many of whom have regional government responsibility. The parliamentary group organized a rally in the Kosmos cinema at Karl-Marx-Allee, the largest cinema in the former East Germany, at which Jean-Luc Mélenchon appeared as a star guest alongside Wagenknecht and Lafontaine.

The only joint appearance of the party and the parliamentary group leaderships was at the annual wreath-laying ceremony at the grave of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht—a "tribute" against which the two revolutionary socialists, murdered 99 years ago, can no longer defend themselves.

The crisis of the Left Party is a consequence of the failure of the perspective on which it was founded over ten years ago. The heirs of the East German Stalinist State party in the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the former SPD functionaries, union bureaucrats and pseudo-leftists in the Electoral Alternative Work and Social Justice (WASG) joined forces in 2005 to compensate for the decline of the SPD, which had rapidly lost influence in the working class after implementing the Hartz welfare and labour "reforms".

Oskar Lafontaine, who had held leading positions in the SPD for forty years, lastly as party chairman and federal finance minister, before giving up office in 1999 amidst conflict with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, had always regarded the SPD's task as keeping the working class under control. If he denounced social ills, it was not to develop a movement to overthrow capitalism, but to capture and stop such a development.

Unlike many other SPD politicians, including Gerhard Schröder, who went through their "Marxist" phase as members of the Young Socialists before they became pillars of the state, Lafontaine always defended the bourgeois order and held extremely right-wing positions regarding domestic policy. As mayor of Saarbrücken, he ensured a balanced budget in the 1970s, and was one of the first to introduce compulsory work for welfare recipients. As Saarland's state premier, he was responsible for the trouble-free shutdown of large parts of the state's coal and steel industry.

After the end of the SPD-Green Party federal government in 2005, Lafontaine supported the founding of the Left Party and, together with Gregor Gysi, took over its leadership, because he hoped in this way he could help to get back a majority for an SPD-led government. "My hope was that the SPD would be compelled by the competition from the left to

carry out social democratic politics again,” he told the *Osnabrücker Zeitung* recently, justifying his attitude at the time.

But this perspective has failed miserably. Not only the SPD—which has ruled for two legislative periods in a grand coalition under Angela Merkel—but also the Left Party, has moved further and further to the right.

In the September 2017 general election, both parties together received just under 30 percent of the vote, 16 percent less than in 1998, when Lafontaine was still chairman of the SPD. The SPD halved its share of the vote, from 40 to 20 percent, while, with 9 percent, the Left Party won only four percent more than the PDS did in 1998. Even including the Greens, this is still not enough for a government majority. Instead, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag, with 12 percent.

“I have repeatedly asked myself whether it would have been more meaningful to fight within the SPD for a renewal”, Lafontaine told the *Osnabrücker Zeitung*. “But that’s water under the bridge. Today, a new all-encompassing left-wing movement would be the right response to the strengthening of the right.”

The task of this movement is to block the left-wing development of the working class and channel growing social outrage in a right-wing direction. Both Lafontaine and Wagenknecht regularly denounce “neoliberalism” and social inequality, but at the heart of their programme is the fomenting of nationalism. Their attitude to refugee policy and the stepping up of state powers at home do not differ from that of the AfD. They attack the government’s refugee policy from the right. In recent days, they have confirmed this in numerous interviews.

Wagenknecht told the *Südwest Presse* that the Left Party’s losses among workers had “to do with the immigration debate”. She told the *Donaukurier*, “The impression that the Left Party advocates a lot of immigration discouraged many within this layer at the previous election.” Nobody could “seriously demand unlimited immigration”. We can’t “give everyone who wants to the opportunity to live in Germany”, she added.

On his Facebook page, Lafontaine blames the “burdens of immigration” for “increased competition in the low-paid sector, rising rents in city neighbourhoods, and increasing difficulties in schools.”

It is no coincidence that Lafontaine and Wagenknecht are working together with Mélenchon, who in Berlin confessed “proudly” that he was “a product of the Left Party”.

Mélenchon was a senior Socialist Party official for thirty years, including as Minister of Vocational Training in the government of Lionel Jospin, before launching a French version of the Left Party (Parti de Gauche) in 2008. Now he

is trying to steer the growing opposition to the anti-working-class policies of President Emmanuel Macron into a nationalist impasse.

“La France insoumise”, tailored to Mélenchon personally, does not base itself on the working class and socialism, but on “the people” and the French nation, to which it wants to give a new bourgeois constitution in the form of a “Sixth Republic”. Like Lafontaine, Mélenchon is an opponent of the European Union. He does not attack it from the left, however, from the point of view of the unity of the European working class, but from the right, from the point of view of the national interests of France, thereby fuelling anti-German nationalism.

Lafontaine and Wagenknecht’s opponents in the Left Party are no less reactionary. On the one hand, they are oriented to groups of the urban middle class, who have become politically homeless due to the rightward development of the Greens. It was here that the Left Party won votes in the general election, while losing almost half a million voters to the AfD among workers and the unemployed. Party leader Katja Kipping, who is considered to be Wagenknecht’s arch-enemy, represents this course, which focuses on environmental issues, identity politics and the like, and supports the European Union.

On the other hand, they are interested only in power, holding government responsibility in the federal states and municipalities and, in close cooperation with the SPD, the Greens and the Christian Democrats, carrying out social and budget cuts. They regard every political dispute as a disruption. Typical representatives of this trend are the Thuringia state premier Bodo Ramelow and Dietmar Bartsch, who heads the parliamentary group together with Wagenknecht.

In the power struggle with the party leadership, Bartsch had long formed a common front with Wagenknecht. However, he rejects her call for an all-embracing left-wing movement.

Common to all the various currents in the Left Party is their hostility to an independent socialist movement of the working class. The more acute social opposition becomes, the more openly they move to the right.



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