

German Left Party leader Sahra Wagenknecht calls for de-globalisation

Peter Schwarz
11 June 2020

Attempts to save economic life by inoculating it with virus from the corpse of nationalism result in blood poisoning which bears the name of fascism.

Leon Trotsky, “Nationalism and Economic Life,” April 1934.

Left Party leader Sahra Wagenknecht’s answer to the coronavirus crisis is to call for de-globalisation. On May 20, she outlined her ideas in the column she regularly writes for the right-wing weekly magazine *Focus*.

Under the headline, “What Germany needs now to save the prosperity of the middle class,” Wagenknecht says, “Protecting workers and domestic suppliers from cheap imports and hostile takeovers is not nationalist, but a democratic duty.... We must bring industrial value creation back to Europe and overcome our dependence in key sectors like the digital economy.”

Wagenknecht justifies her call for “protective measures for the domestic economy” by arguing that in the late 19th century, Germany and the US overcame their industrial backwardness “behind the protection of high tariff walls.” She goes on: “It was not free trade, but protectionism that made both countries rich.”

Those benefiting from more-recent globalisation, she asserts, were “only those countries that have not played by the rules of the Western game—free trade, free movement of capital, withdrawal of the state from the economy—but by their own rules.” China, Japan and South Korea “exposed national industrial sectors to international competition extremely selectively and always only when they were able to survive it on an equal footing.”

Wagenknecht links the call for protectionism with attacks on “globalisation winners,” which she says are “Anglo-Saxon financial investors,” the “international club of billionaires” and a “new upper class of academics living in the trendy inner-city districts of Western metropolises.”

She contrasts them with all those “whose lives have become harder and more uncertain.” There are many

academics among the globalisation “losers,” but above all there are “people who do not have a university degree and whose prospects for a solid job and professional advancement are much lower today than in the second half of the last century.”

The assertion that tariff walls and other protectionist measures serve to protect the socially disadvantaged is false and politically reactionary. It stands not in the tradition of socialism, but rather the tradition of fascism. It serves to stir up nationalism, divide the international working class and prepare for trade war and military war.

Both Mussolini and Hitler blamed the world economy for the deep recession of the 1930s and pursued nationalist economic policies. Leon Trotsky, the most important leader of the Russian October Revolution alongside Lenin, and founder of the Fourth International, wrote the article “Nationalism and Economic Life” in April 1934, from which the above quotation is taken.

In it, Trotsky not only explains the anachronistic, deeply reactionary content of economic nationalism, he also predicts—five years before the Second World War—that “decadent fascist nationalism, preparing volcanic explosions and grandiose clashes in the world arena, bears nothing except ruin. All our experiences on this score during the last 25 or 30 years will seem only an idyllic overture compared to the music of hell that is impending.”

Trotsky’s assessment was based on the Marxist understanding of history, according to which the development of the productive forces is the driving force of human progress. By the 18th and 19th centuries, bourgeois revolutions had overcome medieval particularism and created modern nation-states in which the capitalist economy could develop.

But economic development did not halt within the national framework. World trade grew and the focus shifted from the internal to the external market.

“The 19th century was marked by the fusion of the nation’s fate with the fate of its economic life; but the basic tendency of our century is the growing contradiction

between the nation and economic life,” Trotsky explains. “The present crisis in which are synthesised all the capitalist crises of the past signifies above all the crisis of national economic life.”

The imperialist powers tried to “solve” this crisis by violent expansion at the expense of their rivals. This was the main reason for the two world wars. “One of the main causes of the [First] World War,” Trotsky wrote, “was the striving of German capital to break through into a wider arena. Hitler fought as a corporal in 1914-1918 not to unite the German nation, but in the name of a super-national imperialistic programme.”

But the war brought no solution. Therefore, in 1933, the ruling elites appointed Hitler chancellor and gave him dictatorial powers. The Nazis were used to prepare for a second imperialist world war by smashing the workers’ movement and concentrating the national economy.

Although nearly 90 years old, Trotsky’s article is more relevant today than ever. The integration of the world economy has reached unprecedented levels. Not only trade, but also production chains now span the globe. The world population is four times as large as in 1933, with almost 8 billion people, more than half of whom live in cities.

The attempt to “by force to subordinate economy to the outdated national state” has even more devastating consequences today than it did then. It calls into question the survival of humanity.

Nevertheless, starting with the US, economic nationalism and trade war are spreading like wildfire. To quote Trotsky once again, “Instead of clearing away a suitably large arena for the operations of modern technology, the rulers chop and slice the living organism of economy to pieces.”

All imperialist powers, including Germany, are engaged in massive rearmament. Billions are being spent on the renewal of nuclear arsenals. Preparations for war, especially against China, are well advanced. Everywhere, right-wing and fascist forces are raising their heads.

As an economist with a doctorate, Wagenknecht naturally knows that it is impossible to bring the economy back to the level of decades or centuries ago by peaceful means. In an economically highly developed country like Germany, which is more dependent on the international division of labour than almost any other, this idea is absurd.

Her advocacy of protectionism pursues a different goal. In so doing, she is supporting the German bourgeoisie in future trade wars and military wars against China, and especially against the US. And she seeks to mobilise forces to oppose the unification of the international working class—the only social force capable of overthrowing capitalism and organising the world economy for the benefit of all humanity.

Wagenknecht’s agitation against refugees, which has repeatedly earned her the praise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), was not an accident. She has made many zigzags in her political career, but one thing has always remained constant—her nationalism.

After German reunification in 1991, the 20-year-old served as a youthful figurehead for the Communist Platform in the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which was nothing more than a collection of elderly East German functionaries who clung to Stalinism and its nationalist doctrine of “socialism in one country.” Twenty years later, she began to sing the praises of the reactionary post-war Adenauer era and its economists. She no longer quoted Marx. Instead, she adopted the view that socialism really meant consistent liberalism, with competition, meritocracy and personal responsibility.

Now she calls for the strong state to protect the German economy against “Chinese export dumping” and “foreign takeovers,” and to ensure “genuine competition for performance,” as she explained in an interview with the business magazine *Capital* on May 21. In contrast, she explicitly rejects a “state economy.” It is “not the task of the state to manage companies on a permanent basis,” she declares.

Even though Wagenknecht retired from heading the Left Party parliamentary faction last November, she continues to be one of the party’s leading representatives. She frequently represents the Left Party on talk shows and in the media. She symbolises a party that stands unreservedly behind German imperialism and is prepared to defend the interests of the German bourgeoisie by any and all means against the working class at home and German imperialism’s external rivals.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact