

Engels in the meat grinder

# Germany's Left Party slanders the legacy of Friedrich Engels

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Take the work of an ingenious thinker spanning five-and-a-half decades, run it through the meat grinder, pick half a dozen pieces out of the millions created, and present them in a totally false context! This was the recipe followed by the Left Party's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation at its event commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Engels.

The product was an Engels corresponding perfectly to this party, which is deeply rooted in the capitalist state apparatus: at one point he was a Green, at another a feminist, yet another a ruthless militarist, and even a German patriot. It had nothing to do with the real Engels—the international socialist, the irreconcilable opponent of bourgeois rule who educated generations of workers as revolutionary socialists. The attempt to cut this theoretical giant down to the size of the political needs of the Left Party assumed truly grotesque dimensions.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the commemoration took place online on the evening of 27 November. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS) invited Left Party politicians, activists associated with the party, and Social Democrats to speak about Engels or read extracts collated by Manfred Neuhaus and Michael Brie—two Marx and Engels “experts” from the Stalinist East German school.

The first speaker was Petra Pau, Left Party parliamentary deputy and vice president of the German Federal Parliament. She transformed Engels into a Green. “Friedrich Engels an ecologist, a Green?” she asked. “There’s something in that.” As evidence, she cited Engels’ “Dialectic of Nature,” which she has either never read or didn’t understand. Engels does not discuss environmental conservation in this work, but rather the justification of dialectical materialism. He demonstrates that nature and not just thought “works dialectically,” and that thought is a reflection of nature.

The goal of Pau’s contribution quickly became apparent. She abused Engels to prepare the way for a possible Social Democrat/Left Party/Green coalition government, which would further intensify the policies of militarism and attacks on social spending. In the 21st century, left-wingers must be “socially engaged (red), and Green and Pirates at the same time,” she said.

The next speaker was Peter Brandt, a member of the Social Democrats’ Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s executive. He praised Engels as “a significant philosopher, economist and social scientist,” as a “great German thinker,” and a “master-networker and great communicator of the Internationals,” but not as a socialist or revolutionary. He also made him out to be the pioneer of the pro-war foreign policy of Brandt’s father, Willy Brandt, who was Chancellor between 1969 and 1974, and subsequent SPD governments.

Engels’ theoretical interest in military questions was totally “free from ideology,” claimed Brandt. Hostility to Tsarist Russia accompanied him as a foreign policy constant to the end of his days. Together with the SPD leader at the time, August Bebel, he proposed a “revolutionary defence of the fatherland” in the event of a war with Russia or a conflict involving Russia and its ally, France, Brandt asserted.

Brandt revived the old propaganda used by the SPD to justify its historic betrayal on 4 August, 1914. The party justified its support for the First World War by noting that Marx and Engels, in an earlier historical epoch, advocated a war against Russia, the centre of European reaction. Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin emphatically protested this historical falsification, demonstrating that Germany was pursuing purely imperialist goals with its war against Russia and France.

In his *War and the International*, Trotsky pointed out that even the SPD’s central organ, *Vorwärts*, advanced the exact opposite position one day prior to the party’s vote in favour of war credits.

*Vorwärts* wrote on 3 August, 1914, “But since the days when the leaders of the Social Democracy referred to (Bebel, Lassalle, Engels, Marx) demanded a democratic war against Russia, Russia has quite ceased to be the mere palladium of reaction. Russia is also the seat of revolution. The overthrow of Czarism is now the task of all the Russian people, especially the Russian proletariat, and it is just the last weeks that have shown how vigorously this very working class in Russia is attacking the task that history has laid upon it ...”

One week earlier, *Vorwärts* warned that if the war led to the

toppling of the Tsarist regime, “will not the German armies fight a revolutionary Russia with even greater energy, with a keener desire for victory, than they do the absolutistic Russia?” This was precisely what happened. The SPD’s vote for war credits strengthened chauvinism in Russia, and when the Russian working class finally overthrew the Tsar, Germany, with the SPD’s support, intensified its war.

The historian Brandt, who was a member of the Pabloite International Marxist Group (GIM) in his youth, is extremely familiar with these issues. After German reunification, he then emerged as an unrestrained nationalist. When he defended the right-wing publicist Wolfgang Venohr, who was a member of the Waffen-SS in his youth, in the far-right Junge Freiheit newspaper in 2005, even Social Democratic circles responded with disgust. If he is now reviving the old fairytale of Engels, “the defender of the fatherland,” he does so to pursue extremely reactionary goals. German imperialism is carrying out a massive programme of rearmament, which is supported by the SPD, Greens, and Left Party.

Since 1871, when Germany’s war against France turned into a war of annexation and German troops suppressed the Paris Commune after the working class took power, Marx and Engels were irreconcilable opponents of German militarism. Brandt, who cannot simply ignore this fact, tried to portray them as inventors of the SPD’s “policies of peace and disarmament,” which was never anything but a means of an imperialist foreign policy through which Willy Brandt paved the way for German big business to expand into Eastern Europe and Russia.

Brandt based himself on Engels’ article “Can Europe disarm?”, which appeared in *Vorwärts* in March 1893. According to Brandt, Engels developed “the perspective of general European disarmament at the initiative of Germany, without the rulers having to worry about losing their power.” This is also historical falsification of the crassest type.

In reality, Engels argued in his article for the transformation of the standing armies, a hotbed of political reaction, into “a militia based on the general arming of the people,” an old democratic demand. By this point, the arms race in Europe had reached such a pace, according to Engels, that “the military burden (will) either ruin the peoples economically or erupt into a general war of annihilation.”

Engels demonstrated in his article that the rulers’ refusal to give up their standing armies was purely for political reasons. “I am merely attempting to emphasise that from a purely military standpoint, absolutely nothing stands in the way of the gradual dismantling of the standing armies; and despite this these armies are retained, and that this happens not due to military, but political reasons, and thus in one word, the army is supposed to guard not so much against the external but rather the internal enemy.”

The attempt to compare this principled line of argumentation, on which Bebel based his influential parliamentary speeches, with the foreign policy twists and turns of the SPD’s “peace

policy,” is absurd.

The long-time leader of the Social Democrat Youth (Jusos) and SPD careerist Kevin Kühnert, who also appeared at the RLS birthday party, advanced this line. He also quoted from the *Vorwärts* article from 1893 and claimed that Engels presented general disarmament as a realistic option for peace.

To spare the reader, we will not review all of the meeting’s contributions. Among them was the criticism by Ines Schwerdtner, the editor-in-chief of the German edition of *Jacobin* magazine, which is ensconced within Joe Biden’s Democratic Party, of Engels from a “feminist standpoint.”

But the appearance of Christa Luft must be addressed. As Economy Minister in the GDR in 1990, Luft founded the Treuhand, which dismantled the GDR’s economy, sold off thousands of companies at firesale prices, and destroyed millions of jobs. She later published a book, the title of which summed up the mood within the Stalinist bureaucracy. This was, in the words of Minister President at the time Hans Modrow, that “the road to unity (was) unavoidably necessary and (must) be decisively taken.” Luft’s book was entitled “Passion for property.”

Luft now presents Engels as a “patriot and internationalist,” who always vehemently defended German interests. To prove this, she read a long passage from the book *The Peasant Wars in Germany*, which referred to cultural differences between the German and British workers’ movements, and stated that they “retained the theoretical inclination that the so-called, educated in Germany have so totally lost.” However, there is no trace of patriotism to be found here, other than in Luft’s imagination.

One is tempted to write that in the face of so much stupidity, Engels would be turning in his grave. But that would not correspond to his character. Instead, he would erupt into laughter and write a devastating polemic as he did in 1877 in response to the theoretical quack and political reactionary Eugen Dühring.

The fact that a party so anti-revolutionary and deeply imbedded in the capitalist state apparatus as the Left Party continues to try to claim Engels as their own proves just how significant Engels’ authority is and how deep the Left Party’s fear is that workers and young people will turn to the great revolutionary. His legacy was defended by the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism and is represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei.



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