

The nationalist diatribe of a Left Party leader—a review of the new book by Sahra Wagenknecht

Part two

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Die Selbstgerechten [1] (“*The Self-Righteous*”), the latest book by Sahra Wagenknecht, is a völkisch-nationalist diatribe. Wagenknecht, a leading member of the Left Party, rages venomously against cosmopolitanism and cultural openness while promoting protectionism and a strong state. She denounces migrants and refugees as wage depressors, strikebreakers and foreign cultural elements, and seeks to drive a wedge between working people who have a university degree and those who do not. There are paragraphs in the book that can also be found almost verbatim in texts of the far-right AfD and the Nazis, as we have demonstrated in the first part of this article.

Economic nationalism

In the sphere of economic policy Wagenknecht also draws upon the nationalist ideology associated with the far right. She advocates deglobalisation, protective tariffs and other protectionist measures to protect German companies from foreign competition and the return of value chains back into the country. At the same time, she wants to maintain the export orientation of the German economy—an international leader with an export quota of almost 50 percent of GDP.

“De-globalisation would increase our prosperity and make our economy less vulnerable to crises,” she claims. This is “not about saying goodbye to international trade” but about “global value chains,” under conditions where “80 percent of this world trade today takes place *within the manufacturing chain* of large multinational corporations.”

“It is not free trade, but protectionism” that has made Germany and the USA “rich,” Wagenknecht writes, demanding: “We must change the rules in such a way that each country once again has greater leeway to shape its economic policy. ... Those who expose themselves without protection to imports that undermine their own standards are not open to the world, but stupid. ... Protecting workers and domestic suppliers from cheap imports and hostile takeovers is, in this sense, a democratic duty.”

A simple means of doing this, she writes, is protective tariffs: “We need to bring industrial value creation back to Europe and overcome our dependency in key sectors such as the digital economy. ... the more value created in the country, the greater the prevailing prosperity.”

The claim that tariff walls and other protectionist measures serve to protect the socially disadvantaged and economic prosperity is factually false and politically reactionary.

The absolute and active domination of the world economy over all

national economies is a fundamental fact of modern life. The globalisation of production, combined with outstanding technological advances in IT, communications and transport, has led to a historically unprecedented integration of the world economy and significantly increased the productivity of labour.

Scientific progress, modern technology and the global division of labour have created the conditions to solve all society’s basic problems and enormously enrich the lives and culture of all humanity. For this to happen, however, it is necessary to liberate the productive forces from the shackles of private property and the nation-state upon which capitalism is based.

The subordination of all aspects of economic life to private profit interests leads to the paradoxical situation in which the increase in social wealth leads to an increase in poverty. A handful of billionaires wallow in fabulous luxury while the vast majority can barely make ends meet or live in abject poverty.

The concentration of the economy under the control of finance capital and a handful of monopolies intensifies the global struggle of the imperialist powers for markets, profits and raw materials to the point of open military conflict. Economic nationalism and trade war are intensifying worldwide. All imperialist powers, including Germany, are massively rearming, spending billions on renewing nuclear arsenals. Preparations for war, especially against China, are well advanced.

Only an international offensive of the working class, the overthrow of capitalism and the reorganisation of the world economy on a socialist basis can overcome social inequality, unleash the potential of modern productive forces for social progress and prevent a third world war.

The objective conditions for such a socialist offensive are developing rapidly. The ranks of the international working class have grown enormously. According to the ILO, the global workforce has risen from 2.6 billion to 3.3 billion since the beginning of this century alone. For the first time, the vast majority of humanity lives in cities. Entire regions of the world that used to be predominantly agrarian have been integrated into the global production process.

Wagenknecht’s economic nationalism serves to divide the international working class and support the German bourgeoisie in trade war and war preparations against China, the US and other rivals. Her attempt to lock up the global economy in the cage of the nation-state is directed against the working class, whose existence is bound up with modern productive forces.

Once again, Wagenknecht draws on extreme right-wing models. Mussolini and Hitler had already blamed the world economy for the deep recession of the 1930s and pursued a nationalist economic policy. Leon

Trotsky wrote about this in 1933: “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. ... 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.” [2]

Trotsky warned that fascist nationalism was preparing “volcanic explosions and grandiose clashes in the world arena. ... 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.”

The confirmation of Trotsky’s warning took just six years. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland and launched a war that meant—as he predicted—“complete economic devastation and the destruction of an entire culture.”

From Stalinism to right-wing nationalism

Sahra Wagenknecht began her political career in the 1990s as a spokesperson for the so-called Communist Platform of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the predecessor of the Left Party). At that time, she employed Marxist vocabulary and made regular pilgrimages to Rosa Luxemburg’s memorial, while physically adopting her appearance. At the age of 20, and shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, she had joined the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED), the ruling party of former East Germany. The PDS was founded in 1990, succeeding the Stalinist SED.

The Marxist phraseology of that period has disappeared in Wagenknecht’s latest book. She even carefully avoids the terms “socialism” and “socialist”; an electronic search does not yield a single hit. Instead, she explicitly promotes capitalism—a capitalism without globalisation, “a real meritocracy” where “competition works” and “private property and the pursuit of profit drive technological progress,” where “property based on real performance” makes life easier for entrepreneurs.

On the surface, Wagenknecht has made a 180-degree turn, but this appearance is deceptive. Her development follows a political logic. The Communist Platform was an amalgamation of former Stalinists. It did not defend the socialised property of the GDR and East Germany’s attendant social achievements, but rather the Stalinist SED dictatorship and its repression of the working class—including the suppression of the June 17, 1953 uprising and the building of the Berlin Wall.

Stalinism developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Stalin’s dictatorship embodied the rule of a privileged bureaucracy that had grown disproportionately and usurped Soviet power due to the isolation and economic backwardness of the first workers state. Basing its privileges on the socialised property created by the October Revolution, the bureaucracy felt compelled to adhere to the Marxist phraseology of revolution—but in fact transformed it into its opposite.

At the heart of the Stalinist offensive against Marxism was a vehement advocacy of nationalism and bitter hostility to world socialist revolution. In 1924, the Stalin faction promulgated the theory of “building socialism in one country,” which was diametrically opposed to proletarian internationalism. This became the starting point for a campaign against revolutionary Marxists that culminated in the Great Terror of 1937–38. Hundreds of thousands of those who had played a leading role in the October Revolution, in the initial years of the Soviet Republic and the Communist International died in the course of the Terror. Leon Trotsky, leader of the Left Opposition, was murdered in exile in Mexico in 1940.

After the Second World War, Stalin transferred the Soviet Union’s forms of rule and ownership to Eastern Europe and the eastern part of

Germany in order to protect the Soviet Union against renewed imperialist attack with a chain of buffer states. Unlike the Soviet Union, these states, including the GDR, were not the result of a proletarian revolution. The expropriation of capital and large landholdings represented social progress, but at the same time the SED regime suppressed any independent political movement of the working class.

Although Stalinism and fascism were based on completely different social foundations—Stalinism was a parasitic cancer on the workers state, fascism embodied the dictatorship of finance capital—there were similarities between the two. Both were terrified at the prospect of a revolutionary movement of the working class.

Leon Trotsky wrote in his book *The Revolution Betrayed*: “the crushing of Soviet democracy by an all-powerful bureaucracy and the extermination of bourgeois democracy by fascism were produced by one and the same cause: the dilatoriness of the world proletariat in solving the problems set for it by history. Stalinism and fascism, in spite of a deep difference in social foundations, are symmetrical phenomena. In many of their features they show a deadly similarity. A victorious revolutionary movement in Europe would immediately shake not only fascism, but Soviet Bonapartism.” [3]

Trotsky also predicted in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the bureaucracy would inevitably reintroduce capitalism if the working class failed to overthrow the bureaucracy in a political revolution. His prognosis was confirmed in 1989–90, when the Stalinist rulers in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China introduced private property, looted state property and demolished all of the remaining social gains of the working class.

The SED/PDS also supported capitalist restoration. In 1989, it considered the “path to German unity inevitably necessary” and undertook this task “with determination,” as its last prime minister Hans Modrow wrote in his memoirs. Gregor Gysi, the long-time chairman of the PDS, later expressed his pride in having “led the East’s elites—including the middle functionary level—into German unity.”

In the course of capitalist restoration many former Stalinists turned into open fascists. In Russia and many Eastern European countries, the transition between neo-Stalinist and fascist organisations remains fluid to this day. In Greece, Syriza, the sister party of the Left Party, had no problem forming a government alliance with the far-right Independent Greeks in 2015 to impose the brutal austerity dictates of the Troika in the face of fierce resistance by the working class.

Wagenknecht is thus just one of the many Stalinists turncoats who has ended up on the right.

Corporatism and “strong unions”

Wagenknecht’s right-wing nationalism is part of a sharp turn to the right by the entire trade union and social-democratic milieu. Since the 2000s, she has aligned her politics with Oskar Lafontaine, to whom she is currently married. After a 40-year career in the SPD, Lafontaine united a group of breakaway social democrats and trade union officials with the PDS to form the Left Party.

For Lafontaine, the most important task of the SPD had been to “preserve social peace” —i.e., suppress the class struggle and ensure the stability of capitalist rule. In 1999, he resigned as SPD leader and federal finance minister because he believed that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s policies were undermining the SPD’s ability to keep the working class under control. Lafontaine’s vision for the Left Party, which he headed in its early years together with Gregor Gysi, was to replace the SPD as the main anchor of stability in capitalist society.

Wagenknecht now began to sing the praises of the free market and

meritocracy and extol the type of “ordoliberal” economic policies associated with the post-war rule of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Her book *Freiheit und Kapitalismus* (Freedom and Capitalism) was published in 2011 and *Reichtum ohne Gier* (Wealth without Greed) in 2016. Both books feature many of the motifs to be found in her latest book. For example, in *Wealth without Greed* she writes: “We need what the neoliberals are so fond of writing on their banners, but obliterate in reality: Freedom, initiative, competition, performance-based pay, protection of self-earned property.”

In *The Self-Righteous* Wagenknecht cites the “federal republic of the 1950s to the late 1970s” as a role model. She describes it as an “‘equitable middle-class society’ in which there are no longer stark social contrasts and everyone who makes an effort and follows rules is given the chance for social advancement and a life of solid prosperity”; in which “values such as achievement, diligence, discipline, order, security, stability and normality, were shared by the working classes as well as by the traditional bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes”; in which society was “regarded as a joint affair in which social cohesion, public spirit and responsibility counted not just for oneself but also for others.”

The basis of this capitalist land of milk and honey, according to Wagenknecht, were “powerful trade unions” and a state that imposed “rules and restrictions on the pursuit of profit.” She concludes, “Capitalism works best in highly competitive industries where laws and strong trade unions ensure rising wages and high social and environmental standards.”

All of this is a grotesque distortion of historical reality. The post-war era was marked by the Cold War and a climate of social reaction. The top echelons of German business circles, politics, government and universities were teeming with former Nazis. The social gains won at that time were the result of bitter class battles in Germany itself and also internationally.

In 1956–57, for example, metalworkers in the state of Schleswig-Holstein achieved sick pay in a 16-week strike. In France, 10 million workers went on general strike in 1968, bringing bourgeois rule to the brink of collapse. In 1969, spontaneous mass strikes in the German steel, metal and textile industries put an end to the miserable wage settlements agreed by the union. In the early 1970s, extensive industrial action in the chemical, metal, printing and steel industries, as well as in the public sector, resulted in substantial wage increases, six weeks’ annual leave and other significant concessions.

The unions were not the initiators of these struggles. Instead, they worked closely with the employers and government within the framework of the German system of “co-determination,” and intervened to ensure that industrial struggles did not endanger capitalism. If they nevertheless achieved significant social improvements, it was only because companies could pay under conditions of post-war economic recovery.

The situation changed after the first deep recession in the 1970s. The trade unions reverted into open opponents of the working class. Deprived by the process of globalisation of the ability to negotiate compromises within a national framework, they drew up and enforced the companies’ plans for layoffs and rationalisation under the banner of “competitiveness” and “defending production sites.”

Today, the unions are deeply integrated into the state and big business. Their functionaries and works council leaders earn many times that of an ordinary worker. They move seamlessly from the union to the company boardroom and government posts, and act as co-managers and company cops. Almost without exception, they support domestic and external rearmament. Not a few of the bureaucrats support the far-right AfD.

Wagenknecht’s call for “strong trade unions” aims to strengthen these reactionary, corporatist apparatuses. She praises the trade unions to the skies. While blaming “left liberals” for all the negative consequences of globalisation, she is silent on the role of the trade unions and their officials who have signed deals involving the shedding of millions of jobs, agreed

significant wage cuts and, in their role as government ministers, have overseen the reduction of unemployment benefits, pensions and other social benefits.

With her advocacy of corporatist unions Wagenknecht is not reinventing the wheel. The tendency to cooperate with big business and the state has long characterised the trade unions. Especially in times of crisis and war, they tend to merge with the state. Fascism took corporatism to its ultimate consequence, transforming trade unions into direct organs of the state.

Conclusion

The political evolution of Wagenknecht and the Left Party can only be understood against the background of objective social changes. The class struggle and the tensions between the major imperialist powers have reached a degree of intensity that no longer permits half measures. All political tendencies are forced to show their true colours.

Capitalism is in its deepest international crisis since the end of World War II. The profit-before-life policy of the ruling classes in response to the coronavirus pandemic has claimed millions of lives and created widespread social misery—with no end in sight. At the same time, the stock market and the fortunes of billionaires climb from one record to another. Explosive class struggles are looming worldwide, which will inevitably assume an international and socialist direction.

The Left Party is reacting to this development with a sharp lurch to the right. The idea that this party can contribute to socialism, fomented by pseudo-left currents in and around its ranks, has always been a colossal fraud. Historically, the Left Party is rooted in Stalinism, the most bitter opponent of socialism. Socially, it relies on members of the middle class and bureaucratic apparatuses, who fear that an uprising by workers would threaten their privileged positions and bank accounts. Politically, the party is a staunch pillar of capitalist rule.

The Greek sister party of the Left Party, Syriza, already demonstrated where it stood in 2015. Faced with the alternative of accepting the Troika’s austerity dictates or fighting against them, Syriza in power disregarded the very referendum it had organised and enforced unprecedented social cutbacks in the face of fierce resistance by workers.

The ruling class all over the world is responding to the global crisis of capitalism by turning to militarism and dictatorship. Staggering social inequality, unceasing attacks on jobs and wages, millions of avoidable coronavirus deaths and massive preparations for war are incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

In the US, Donald Trump is transforming the Republican Party into a fascist movement, while Joe Biden pleads for unity with the Republicans. In Germany, one reactionary police law follows the next, right-wing terrorist networks are spreading throughout the country’s security forces, and the AfD, an extreme right-wing party, sits in the Bundestag where it is courted by the other parties. Wagenknecht’s book makes clear that the Left Party is an integral part of this right-wing front.

A socialist movement of the working class can only be built in opposition to the Left Party and its pseudo-left hangers-on. The International Committee of the Fourth International, to which the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is affiliated, was founded in 1953 to defend the programme of world socialist revolution against all those who aligned themselves with Stalinism, social democracy and petty-bourgeois nationalism.

Today, the ICFI’s political and theoretical struggle is gaining enormous importance. Under conditions where the working class is radicalising worldwide and its struggle is taking on international dimensions, the Left Party and other pseudo-left organisations are moving rapidly to the

right—as Wagenknecht's book underlines. Anyone who seriously wants to fight for a socialist perspective must join the ICFI and SGP and support the struggle to mobilise the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society.

Notes

[1] Sahra Wagenknecht, *The Self-Righteous. Mein Gegenprogramm – für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt*, Campus Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 2021.

[2] Leon Trotsky, “Nationalism and Economic Life” (1934).
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/xx/nationalism.htm>

[3] Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch11.htm#ch11-1>



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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