

The collapse of Germany's Left Party

Peter Schwarz
29 September 2021

The Left Party suffered a devastating defeat in Germany's September 26 federal election, even though the election was marked by massive social discontent. The vote for the party of outgoing chancellor Angela Merkel, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), plummeted and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) lost more than two million votes.

Compared to the 2017 federal election, the Left Party's share of the vote almost halved. It lost 4.3 percentage points and only achieved a 4.9 percent score. Its number of seats shrank from 69 to 39, making it by far the smallest parliamentary group in the Bundestag, which has grown to 730 members. If it had not won three directly elected deputies—two in Berlin and one in Leipzig—it would no longer have been represented in the new Bundestag, because it failed to clear the five-percent hurdle required for proportional representation.

The vote losses are spread across all the federal states and affect all the political wings of the Left Party. They are particularly dramatic in the five eastern states, the party's former strongholds. Here, it averaged only 9.8 percent. Only in Thuringia (11.4) and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (11.1) did it still achieve double-digit results. In Thuringia, where the Left Party has held the state premiership for seven years with Bodo Ramelow, it was only the fourth-strongest party behind the AfD (24), the Social Democrats (23.4) and the CDU (16.9).

The Left Party also lost massively in the west. In North Rhine-Westphalia, where Sahra Wagenknecht was the lead candidate, it lost 3.8 points to just 3.7 percent.

In the elections to the state parliaments in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the Left Party also suffered losses, although not to the same extent as in the national elections. In Berlin, its result fell by 1.6 points to 14 percent, and in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania by 3.3 points to 9.9 percent.

The collapse of the Left Party is all the more remarkable because the mood in the elections was clearly left-wing. This is shown not only by the massive vote losses of the CDU, its Bavarian sister party the CSU, and the AfD, but also by the polls on the main issues that preoccupied voters. The coronavirus pandemic, climate change and social inequality were consistently at the top of the list.

In Berlin, a referendum held alongside the elections saw 56.4 percent in favour of expropriating large private housing corporations, with only 39 percent voting against. But, although the referendum's initiators are close to the Left Party, it did not benefit.

The reason for the Left Party's collapse

The party leadership has no explanation for its collapse in the elections other than superficial speculation. Yet the reason for the Left Party's fall is obvious. It is due to its right-wing, capitalist policies, which can no longer be disguised with left-wing phrases. After years of experience with its government practices, no one falls for the claim any more that it is a left alternative to the other bourgeois parties.

Already from 2002 to 2011, the alliance of SPD and Left Party that governed Berlin was the nationwide leader in cutting public sector jobs and wages, privatizing hospitals and selling off public housing to speculators. The sharp social contradictions in the capital are a result of these policies.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Left Party supported the Grand Coalition's "profits before lives" policy, which has already claimed 94,000 lives and is now leading to a dangerous fourth wave. Bodo Ramelow, the minister-president of Thuringia, the sole state where the Left Party leads the government, has repeatedly led the way in lifting restrictions. As a result, Thuringia has the second highest infection rate in Germany: 6.3 percent of the total population have contracted the virus so far.

The state also ranks high in the deportation of refugees. And it is a stronghold of the AfD, which is led in Thuringia by fascist Björn Höcke and is courted by the Left Party. After an alliance of AfD, CDU and FDP toppled Ramelow in 2019 and he was only returned to office thanks to public protests, he personally helped AfD nominee Michael Kaufmann to the post of vice-president of the state parliament with his own vote.

During the federal election, the right-wing character of the Left Party was visible to everyone. Its entire election campaign was geared toward offering itself as a coalition partner to the SPD and the Greens, the parties of war and welfare cuts. In the midst of the election campaign, it openly declared its support for NATO for the first time and—by abstentions and several votes in favour—supported the war mission of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) in Afghanistan.

Shortly before the election date, it replaced its election programme with an "immediate programme" that was virtually identical with the positions of the SPD and the Greens on all issues. Many voters preferred to vote for the original instead of the copy. According to broadcaster ARD's analysis, 590,000 Left Party voters migrated to the SPD and 470,000 to the Greens. 520,000 did not vote at all.

The Left Party is reacting to the election debacle with a further shift to the right. In addition to Ramelow, Dietmar Bartsch, the chair of the Bundestag parliamentary group and others have spoken out in favour of a more prominent role for Sahra Wagenknecht after the election. Ramelow told the newspaper *Die Welt*: "I always had a good relationship with Sahra Wagenknecht. I think it's good that she's back."

Wagenknecht had published the book *Die Selbstgerechten* (*The Self-Righteous*) shortly before the start of the election campaign. It is a nationalist diatribe that rails against cosmopolitanism and openness to the world, promotes protectionism and a strong state, and denounces immigrants and refugees for allegedly pushing down wages, and as strike-breakers and elements alien to the German culture.

Participation in the federal government is now no longer an option for the Left Party, as the number of its MPs is not sufficient for an alliance with the SPD and the Greens. But it is pushing all the harder for government participation in the federal states. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where the SPD previously governed with the CDU, it offered itself to the SPD on election night to help the Social Democrats secure a majority. In Berlin, it wants to continue the coalition with the SPD and the

The bankruptcy of the pseudo-left Marx21 and SAV

The Left Party's collapse delivers a damning verdict on pseudo-left organizations like Marx21, Socialist Alternative (SAV) and RIO, which for many years have fuelled the illusion that the Left Party could be transformed into a socialist party through pressure from within or without.

In reality, the Left Party was a bourgeois party from the beginning. Its origins go back to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany, which in 1989 supported the reunification of Germany on a capitalist basis. Its perspective at the time was summed up by the last SED prime minister and long-time honorary chairman of its immediate successor, the PDS, Hans Modrow: "In my view, the path to unity was unavoidably necessary and had to be taken with determination," he wrote in his memoirs.

The PDS held steadfastly to this determination to defend capitalism from then on. It soon became a factor of order again in the East German municipalities and states, suppressing opposition to the disastrous social consequences of capitalist restoration.

In 2007, the PDS merged with the West German Electoral Alternative for Work and Social Justice (WASG) to form the Left Party. The WASG was a rallying point for union bureaucrats, SPD functionaries and pseudo-lefts who feared that the SPD and the unions would lose their control over the working class after the Schröder government's Agenda 2010 introduced massive attacks on welfare and workers' rights.

The leaders of the new party were PDS founder Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine, who had 40 years of experience in the highest SPD positions and state offices. Among other things, he had been mayor of Saarbrücken, minister-president of Saarland, state and federal SPD chairman, SPD candidate for chancellor and federal finance minister under Schröder.

While the old SED cadres in the Left Party made little effort to disguise their right-wing and conservative character, several pseudo-left tendencies made an effort to present it as a left-wing, socialist party.

In the 1990s, Jakob Moneta, Winfried Wolf and other leading representatives of Ernest Mandel's Pabloite United Secretariat joined the PDS, where they quickly rose to the executive committee or became members of the Bundestag. With the founding of the Left Party they were followed by Marx21 and SAV, whose international roots go back to the "state capitalist" tendency founded by Tony Cliff and the Militant Tendency founded by Ted Grant. Previously they had both moved in the periphery of the SPD.

These pseudo-lefts play a leading role in the party. Janine Wissler, who was a member of Marx21 and its predecessor organisations for 20 years, is co-chair of the Left Party and led it in the election campaign together with Dietmar Bartsch as the top candidate. She has defended the party's orientation towards government participation and its approval of NATO in numerous talk-show appearances, election campaign speeches and interviews.

The pseudo-lefts have not moved the Left Party to the left, as they promised, they have gone to the right with it. The reason for this is the class character of these tendencies. They do not represent the interests of the working class, but the affluent middle class—academics, trade union and party officials, etc.—who defend the existing social order in order to preserve their privileges.

What attracted them to the Left Party was not its hollow social phrases, but its defence of the bourgeois order and the tens of millions that flow into party coffers each year through parliamentary salaries, campaign expense reimbursements and grants by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

The pseudo-left's turn to the right is an international phenomenon. In Greece, Syriza was elected as the governing party in 2015 on a wave of opposition to EU austerity dictates and then implemented a brutal austerity programme. In Spain, Podemos, as a part of the government, supports ruthless sanctions policies, the criminalization of Catalan separatists, and brutal social attacks. In the US, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) operate as a left-wing fig leaf for the Biden administration.

It is therefore consistent that the pseudo-lefts continue to cling to the lie that the Left Party can be transformed into a socialist party. Marx21 has published a long statement "The Left Party: What to do after the election debacle," which blames "left-blinking Social Democrats and Greens," the "reformer camp" of the Left Party, Sahra Wagenknecht and many others for the election defeat and calls for a "new start" for the Left in the opposition.

The votes for the SPD and the Greens were "linked to the hope for progressive social and ecological policies," Marx21 claims. "If they don't deliver, it will soon become clear that there is still an urgent need for a strong left." An urgent need to suppress opposition to the government, it should correctly read. Janine Wissler, the very own product of Marx21, is not mentioned in the statement once. You can't cover your own tracks in a more cowardly fashion than that.

The perspective of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei

The SGP, unlike the pseudo-left, has always insisted that a socialist movement can only be built in irreconcilable political struggle against the Left Party and the entire social democratic and trade union milieu to which it belongs.

As early as March 2, 1990, when a party congress of the PDS—then still in the GDR—adopted a social democratic programme that rejected class struggle and supported capitalist ownership, we wrote in *Neue Arbeiterpresse*: "The working class must break with Stalinism in its new form just as decisively as with the Stalinism of [former SED-leaders] Honecker and Krenz. The PDS does not represent their interests, but those of a privileged layer of bureaucrats who now want to make a career in capitalism."

Since then, we have published hundreds of articles and statements explaining why the struggle for socialism is only possible against Die Linke and requires a break with it. Its fall is therefore to be welcomed. It is the consequence of a sharp class polarisation. Millions of Corona deaths, an unprecedented gap between rich and poor, and the return to militarism, rearmament and war are putting fierce class struggles on the agenda around the world.

The ruling classes are responding by closing ranks, moving further to the right, arming the state apparatus and strengthening fascist forces. This is also true of the Left Party.

The working class is moving in the opposite direction. Signs of resistance are multiplying around the world—strikes against low wages, intolerable working conditions and lay-offs, protests against herd immunity policies in the pandemic, demonstrations against high rents and global warming.

These struggles require a fundamental political reorientation. The working class must organize independently, unite internationally and fight for a socialist programme—for the establishment of workers' governments, the expropriation of the big corporations and banks, and the reorganization of production under democratic control.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting for this

programme. The International Committee has defended the Marxist programme of revolutionary socialism for decades against currents like Marx21 and SAV, which are integrating themselves ever deeper into the capitalist state. Today, it is the only socialist tendency worthy of the name.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact