

Oskar Lafontaine leaves the Left Party

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For the second time in his life, Oskar Lafontaine has left a party that he himself helped to build and lead. On March 17, the 78-year-old declared his resignation from Die Linke (Left Party).

Twenty-three years ago, Lafontaine resigned as federal chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), a party in which he had previously been active for 40 years. At that time, he also resigned as minister of finance and as a Bundestag (federal parliament) deputy with immediate effect. In 2007, together with Gregor Gysi, he founded the Left Party, which he led for three years. Most recently, he was chair of the hopelessly divided Left Party parliamentary group in Saarland, where party expulsion proceedings against him were underway.

In a short statement, Lafontaine justified his resignation by saying: “I once left the SPD because it had become a party that, in contrast to Willy Brandt’s tradition of social democracy, promoted low wages, cut pensions and social benefits and supported the participation of the Bundeswehr [armed forces] in wars that violated international law. I wanted there to be a left alternative to the politics of social insecurity and inequality in the political spectrum, which is why I co-founded the Left Party. Today’s Left Party has abandoned this claim.”

Who is Lafontaine trying to fool with this?

When Die Linke was founded in 2007, it had long been clear that it was not a “left alternative to the politics of social insecurity and inequality.” In Berlin, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the immediate successor to the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany), which provided the majority of the new party’s members, had been sitting in the Senate (state executive) for five years and was responsible for a programme of drastic cuts in social spending that was unique in Germany. In other states and municipalities in the former East Germany, the PDS played a similar

role, proving itself to be a reliable pillar of the capitalist order.

The WASG (Labour and Social Justice-The Electoral Alternative), which merged with the PDS to form the Die Linke, consisted of jaded social democrats and trade unionists. These had supported the SPD’s anti-working-class policies for years and were now panicking that the devastating social consequences of the Schröder government’s Agenda 2010 welfare cuts and labour “reforms” would lead to the demise of the SPD and the revival of class struggle. The Left Party was supposed to prevent this.

This project failed miserably. It is no coincidence that Lafontaine’s resignation comes at a time when the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the Ukraine war are placing open class struggles on the agenda worldwide. The illusion that there could be a return to the reformist politics of Willy Brandt, who by making social concessions diverted a militant wave of labour struggles and youth protests in the early 1970s, has been shattered.

Capitalism now knows only one direction of travel: ever sharper attacks on the working class. To keep profits flowing and prevent the huge speculative bubble from bursting, wages must be lowered, the exploitation of labour increased and jobs destroyed. The conflict in Ukraine, a proxy war between NATO and Russia, ushers in a new round of imperialist struggles for the redivision of the world.

Germany is pouring an additional €100 billion into armaments, but there is not a cent for education, health and other urgent social needs. In Berlin, Die Linke is in a coalition in the Senate, which is cutting the last freely available funds from the schools.

The Left Party is breaking apart under the pressure of these contradictions. While a large portion of the Left Party leadership—those like Ramelow, Kipping, Bartsch, Gysi & Co—are merging with the state

apparatus and openly support NATO's war policy, others are sliding into the extreme-right camp. Lafontaine and his wife Sahra Wagenknecht have long drawn attention to themselves through their xenophobic tirades, solidarity with anti-vaxxers and völkisch-nationalist agitation.

The claim that Lafontaine is a "left-winger" has always been false. Educated in an episcopal seminary in the Eifel, he was far closer to Catholic social teachings than to the Marxist doctrine of class struggle. His social policies always pursued the goal of suppressing the class struggle, not strengthening the working class. This went hand in hand with the policy of a strong state and an abhorrent nationalism.

For example, in the 1970s, as mayor of Saarbrücken, Lafontaine was the first to introduce compulsory labour for young welfare recipients. As minister-president of Saarland, he then wound up the state's mining and steel industries. Between 1960 and 2005, four-fifths of the nearly 100,000 jobs there were destroyed. Through close collaboration with the trade unions and certain measures to cushion the immediate social impact of the jobs massacre, Lafontaine succeeded in breaking workers' ferocious resistance to this.

Even then, Lafontaine combined social cuts with fierce attacks on refugees and immigrants, whom he called "foreign workers" in the jargon of right-wing extremists. In 1993, he ensured that the SPD agreed to the de facto abolition of the right to asylum.

The reason for Lafontaine's break with the SPD in 1999 was the fear that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 would undermine the SPD's ability to control the class struggle.

We asked the question at the time: "Why did Lafontaine surrender without a fight and not make the slightest attempt to defend his views and win support for them?" The answer was clear: "If Lafontaine had attempted to defy a business lobby which has ever more unashamedly sought to dictate government policy ... He would have set in motion social forces and that is the last thing he wants."

After the break with the SPD, Lafontaine increasingly openly displayed his authoritarian and nationalist views.

On the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he wrote: "Open societies need a strong state. Deregulation, privatisation, green cards for technicians,

pilot's licences for a few dollars, freedom of establishment for everyone and empty state coffers undermine internal and external security. The scorn for the state must end."

Lafontaine's "pacifism," which goes back to the demonstrations against the deployment of US Pershing II missiles in the early 1980s, is directed only against the US. When it comes to German interests, on the other hand, Lafontaine is a militarist.

Thus, in 2017, when the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Russia, he wrote: "It is time for Europe to look after its own interests and abandon its more or less unconditional allegiance to the US." Unfortunately, he said, the Left Party was "the only party that is not swimming obediently behind the only remaining world power." Only "a strong Left Party in the Bundestag could, in the face of any conceivable coalition of neoliberal parties ... keep pushing for Germany's and Europe's own interests to be represented more strongly than the 'dishonest' goals of US policy."

On refugee policy, Lafontaine has held the same positions as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) since 2015 at the latest. In autumn 2020, he even presented a new book by the racist agitator Thilo Sarrazin in Munich.

Since their foundation, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) has taken the position that the PDS and Die Linke are pro-capitalist parties and that a socialist opposition can only be built in political struggle against them. Pseudo-left organisations like Marx21 (affiliated with Britain's Socialist Workers Party) and SAV (affiliated with the Socialist Party of England and Wales), on the other hand, have found a cosy home in Die Linke because they themselves are opponents of a socialist perspective.



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