

The disintegration of the German Left Party—the price of right-wing politics

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On Wednesday, Susanne Hennig-Wellsow relinquished the leadership of the German Die Linke (Left Party) with immediate effect. It had only been 14 months since she and her co-leader, Janine Wissler, had been elected to head the party. Wissler is now to lead the party alone until a new leadership is elected in June.

Hennig-Wellsow's resignation is just the latest chapter in a rapid disintegration of the Left Party. In last September's federal election, it lost nearly half its previous share of the vote and missed the 5 percent hurdle required for parliamentary representation. Only because it won three direct mandates is a Left Party faction returning to the Bundestag at all. Presently, the party polls at 4 percent nationwide.

At the end of March, the Left Party plummeted from 12.8 to 2.6 percent in the Saarland state election. Oskar Lafontaine, who had co-founded the party in 2007 and ultimately led the state parliamentary group in Saarland, had quit the party shortly before.

As is always the case with internally rotten parties, the political issues underlying their decline are not openly discussed. Instead, the tensions and wing wars that inevitably accompany decay are fought out over sideshows—scandals, affairs and personal accusations.

Hennig-Wellsow's resignation is no exception in this respect. She begins her resignation statement with a lengthy lament about the party's crisis, without once getting specific, followed up with volleys of poisoned arrows upon her rivals.

"We could not deliver on the promise to be part of a forward change in policy due to our own weakness," she states. "We have delivered too little of what we promised. Any real new beginning has failed to materialize. An apology is due, an apology to our voters whose hopes and expectations we have disappointed."

And further: "A programmatic, strategic and cultural renewal of the Left is necessary, as we have known for years. I have done all within my power to contribute to it. But we have not yet come as far along this path as I believe

we should have. We have betrayed trusts ..."

Hennig-Wellsow cites three reasons for her resignation: Her private life situation, the political difficulties of recent months—"the renewal needs new faces to be credible"—and the "handling of sexism in our own ranks."

The second and third reasons are directed at internal party rivals, especially at co-chair Janine Wissler. The influential weekly *Der Spiegel* published a long article last Friday about allegations of sexual assault in the Hessian state party, where Wissler played a leading role for years. In it, Wissler's then-life-partner is accused of sexual assault and Wissler herself of covering it up.

Although a party statement affirmed to Wissler that she had behaved in a politically correct manner, the accusations of sexism have since been further amplified—especially within the Left Party-associated Solid youth organization—in an internal party #MeToo campaign. Only an independent investigation can show what to make of all this. In any case, the sexism accusations are not the cause, but only a means in the internal party mud fight.

The real cause of the Left Party's crisis and decline is its right-wing politics. The worsening of the social crisis as a result of the pandemic and inflation, as well as the war in Ukraine, have made it impossible to hide its right-wing policies under left-wing phrases. Whoever voted for the Left Party under the wrong impression that it was a left-wing alternative is turning away.

The claim that the Left Party and its predecessor, the PDS, are left-wing, anti-capitalist or socialist has always been a fraud. Emerging from the Stalinist state party of East Germany, the PDS initially served as a wailing wall for all those who had been short-changed in German reunification, which the PDS itself had supported. But the more it was needed to quell social tensions in the East, the more openly it professed its support for social cuts and a police state.

In 2007, renegade Social Democrats and union bureaucrats from the West, who feared that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) could no longer keep the class struggle under control because of its mass-impoverishing Agenda 2010, united with

the PDS to form the Left Party. Several pseudo-leftist groups who had previously led a meagre existence in the pocket of the SPD and trade unions also joined the new party, which provided them with lucrative political careers. Among them was Janine Wissler, who had been a member of the group Marx21, close to the International Socialist Tendency, and its predecessors for two decades.

In the federal states where it assumed government responsibility, the Left Party cut social spending as savagely as any other party, deported refugees and outfitted the police. In the state of Thuringia, the party has held the prime ministership for the last seven years.

With the Ukraine war, the Left Party is letting the last fig leaf fall: its nominal renunciation of militarism and NATO, which was never more than platonic lip service without practical consequences.

Gregor Gysi, a founding member and long-time leader of the PDS and the Left Party, tried to win support for the German federal government's €100 billion rearmament program as early as February. Gysi accused left-wing deputies who opposed it: "You are only interested in saving every aspect of your old ideology. NATO is evil, the US is evil, the federal government is evil, and that's the end of it for you."

Hennig-Wellsow immediately backed Gysi. In a written contribution, she called for "self-criticism." The Russian attack on Ukraine showed "how great one's own illusions were" that had led to "devastating misjudgements." One cannot "cling to 'truths' that have been crushed by tanks and missiles."

Even if it is not easy to "reconcile the desire for peace and the will to defend," Hennig-Wellsow said, the party must ratchet up its "own notion of 'defensive potentials.'" The call for the "dissolution of NATO and its replacement by a collective security system with the participation of Russia," which is still in the party's current program, must also be questioned, she said.

Hennig-Wellsow, the daughter of an East German policeman taken on by the West German police after reunification, was State Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow's right hand as the Thuringia state party parliamentary group leader before moving to Berlin last year. She is one of those Left Party representatives particularly eager to prove their "ability to govern," i.e., their unqualified loyalty to the capitalist order.

Now she has resigned, irked, but her war path has become official policy of the Left Party, fitting seamlessly into the war propaganda of NATO, which is flooding Ukraine with weapons, waging a proxy war against Russia and risking a nuclear World War III.

On March 6, in a recent general debate in the Bundestag,

Left parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch explicitly backed the German government, which is supplying Ukraine with arms on a large scale, and called for unity among the "West," i.e., NATO.

"I want to state this clearly: the responsibility for the war and the crimes lies with Russia, not with anyone in Germany," he declared, calling on all other parties to stand united: "Those who try to instrumentalize the war in Ukraine for party political reasons are not contributing to ending the war, but are playing into the cards of Russian propaganda of a divided West."

To the extent Bartsch criticized the German government, the criticism came from the right. "Why is Germany failing to enforce sanctions against Russian oligarchs?" he asked. Belgium, France and Italy, he said, had managed to freeze much higher sums.

In a video published by *Die Welt*, Bartsch advocated a halt to energy imports from Russia, something even the ruling government has so far rejected for fear of devastating economic consequences. It is an "insane situation," he said. "We are financing this war. We are transferring hundreds of millions every day into Putin's war chest."

There is no serious opposition to this war policy within the Left Party. Janine Wissler loyally supports the course of Gysi, Bartsch and Hennig-Wellsow.

Left Party politician Sahra Wagenknecht and her followers, who most clearly distance themselves from NATO, do so from a German-nationalist standpoint rather than a principled stand against German militarism. They believe that German imperialism could better advance its national interests by breaking away from US dominance.

Socialist opposition to war, on the other hand, is based on the class struggle. It strives to unite the workers of all nations and upholds Karl Liebknecht's principle: "The main enemy is in your own country." Today, only the Socialist Equality Party embodies this tradition, which fights on a socialist basis against NATO aggression, pandemic "profits before lives" policies and screaming social inequality.



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