

The right-wing roots of Sarah Wagenknecht's party in Saxony, Germany

Martin Nowak
28 February 2024

The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) founded its first regional organisation last Saturday in Chemnitz, Saxony. The BSW, which had only constituted itself as a national party in January, shortly afterwards adopted a programme for the European elections. Its capitalist and nationalist orientation represents the interests of German corporations in the name of small businesses and the self-employed—or in the language of the BSW, the “performance-oriented middle class.”

It is no coincidence that the first regional organisation is being founded in Saxony, an East German federal state. Following the European elections on June 9, state elections will be held in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg in September this year. The BSW hopes for an immediate entry into the state parliament in the eastern German states. According to the strongly fluctuating poll figures, it will land somewhere between 6 and 20 percent. A state association is therefore to be founded in Thuringia on March 15. There is as yet no news of an organisation for Brandenburg.

The fact that the organisation of a state association in Saxony was the first to be accomplished is also linked to the traditions of the Left Party there. It has its largest and most right-wing regional organisation in Saxony. The hand-picked leadership of the BSW is part of this tradition. As the leadership duo, the 60 BSW members who came together in Chemnitz for the founding party conference elected the long-standing party and trade union official Sabine Zimmermann and the entrepreneur Jörg Scheibe, previously without political affiliation.

Following reunification in 1990, the 63-year-old Zimmermann, who worked in the former East Germany's construction materials and waste management industry, joined the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) as a union secretary. After ten years in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), for which she sat in the Saxony state parliament for a few months, she entered the Bundestag (federal parliament) in 2005 via the Left Party's state list. She lost her seat in 2021.

Scheibe runs his own architecture firm in Chemnitz. Like the businessman and millionaire Ralph Suikat, the BSW federal treasurer, he symbolises the illusory core message of the party: the reconciliation of the classes.

Other founding members complete this picture. Alexander Schultz and Silke Hessberg both sat in the Zwickau district council, Schultz for the SPD and Hessberg as a non-partisan representative for the Left Party. Hessberg was managing partner of InSenTec—Innovative Sensortechnik—for five years before moving to the West Saxony University of Applied Sciences in Zwickau as a professor in 2001.

The BSW's social orientation and programme follow the political continuity of the OWUS business association, which was founded by the Left Party's predecessor the PDS in 1994 and which had one of its focal points in Saxony. According to its own description, it represented the interests of “small and medium-sized companies, freelancers and the self-employed” with “economic rationality and social responsibility.” The BSW defines itself in a similar way.

The OWUS is primarily organised by former East German Stalinist functionaries who became capitalists after reunification. In a brochure published by the business association together with the Left Party's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation to mark its twentieth anniversary, this social basis is described quite openly:

The majority were former SED [Stalinist party of state] members, including former active functionaries in the party, in business or state administration, former plant or department heads of state-owned enterprises, functionaries of mass organisations such as the FDJ [SED youth movement] and FDGB [union federation], teachers, cultural workers, members of the armed forces and academics.

Small business owners and left-wingers—a plea for a joint search for an alternatives, p. 5

In other words, they were members of the Stalinist bureaucracy that had oppressed the working class in East Germany for decades and initiated the introduction of capitalism there in 1990.

The first chairwoman of the OWUS was Christa Luft, who had founded the Treuhandanstalt, the agency charged with selling off and dismantling the socialised property of the former East Germany. This was set up in March 1990 on behalf of the last SED government under Hans Modrow and had begun privatising state-owned enterprises. Luft recorded her experiences from this period in her book *Lust am Eigentum* (Lust for Property).

Not only the new entrepreneurs in the East, who hoped for their “fair” share of the spoils, were recruited from the Stalinist apparatchiks turned capitalists, but also right-wing political elements such as Christine Ostrowski. As a founding member of the OWUS, a city councillor in Dresden and a top politician in the PDS, for which she sat in the Bundestag until 2002, she was on the extreme right wing of the party. Having already cultivated contacts with regional neo-Nazis in the 1990s, she supported the racist PEGIDA movement after leaving the PDS in 2007. In 2016, she openly called on people to vote for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Ostrowski is not an isolated case, but embodies an entire tendency in the PDS, which was striving to become an East German “people’s party” modelled on the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). This *realpolitik* faction came to the fore in Dresden in 2006 with the sale of the municipal property company WoBa, which was only possible with the approval of sections of the PDS.

The “success” of the short-sighted justification that this would make Dresden debt-free did not last long. In the meantime, Dresden is once again in debt, rents have exploded, and the city began buying back the first 1,213 flats from Vonovia in 2023, for a total of €87.8 million. In view of the fact that the city realised €982 million for around 48,000 of its own flats at the time, investors are thus benefiting from a quadrupling of the price.

At that time, this openly right-wing tendency finally exited the Left Party. Ronald Weckesser, a close confidant of Ostrowski, explained his departure to the *Tagesspiegel* in 2009, citing the party’s “arbitrary” and “irresponsible” demands, such as the €10 minimum wage, which he denounced as “populism.”

“Things are being promised that couldn’t even be kept if we won the election,” he said. “But the party concept is that it is not important whether this can be realised. The important thing is that we have the demand.”

Even after Weckesser and Ostrowski left the party, this openly right-wing tendency pushing

for *realpolitik* continued to exist. In 2013, the Left Party in Saxony, led by its long-standing chairman Rico Gebhardt, agreed to a policy statement on the debt brake. Katja Kipping’s rise to the top of the federal party also began with this Saxony offensive in favour of “radical left-wing *realpolitik*.” Most recently, as Berlin Senator (state minister) for Labour and Social Affairs, Kipping implemented the right-wing programme of the Giffey government.

At the time, Wagenknecht’s current husband Oskar Lafontaine was one of the “populists” that Weckesser attacked. Lafontaine had previously held leading party and government positions in the SPD for 40 years and, as state premier of Saarland, had also wound up the coal mining and steel industries in the state. In order to cushion the dissatisfaction that the SPD caused with its Agenda 2010 labour and welfare “reforms” and the deployment of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) in foreign wars, Lafontaine finally left the SPD. In 2007, he took part in the founding of the Left Party, which pursued the same austerity policies as the SPD under the guise of left-wing phrases.

In the face of even greater anger at the official pro-war policy and accompanying social attacks, Wagenknecht is now once again trying to channel the discontent. While the rest of the Left Party is openly siding with the federal coalition government and vying with the Greens for influence in the urban middle classes on the basis of identity politics, the BSW is focussing on a right-wing, nationalist agenda.

The social “populism” that Weckesser and Ostrowski deplored at the time is being replaced by “economic reason,” xenophobic agitation and nationalistic slogans in favour of Germany’s foreign policy “independence.” Wagenknecht’s statements that a government collaboration with Michael Kretschmer from the CDU in Saxony was conceivable complete the circle. The BSW could soon be in Saxony what Ostrowski and Co. wanted 20 years ago: an openly right-wing governing party that dispenses with any left-wing masquerade.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact