

# How the German Left Party is trying to curb the radicalisation of the youth

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Many young people in Germany have been radicalised by the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), bleak prospects for the future as a result of economic recession, job cuts and AI, high rents and inflation—which make university unaffordable—along with the introduction of compulsory military service, the rearmament of the Bundeswehr, the genocide in Gaza, and wars in the Middle East and Ukraine.

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The Left Party has managed to attract some of these youth. The party, which seemed to be on the brink of collapse just a year and a half ago, has more than doubled its membership to 126,000. This was also reflected at the party conference. Just under half of the 570 delegates had been party members for less than three and a half years, and a quarter for less than one and a half years. The average age of the delegates was 37.

Membership growth is heavily concentrated in the western German federal states and urban centres. According to internal party analyses, the main motivation is anti-fascism (78 percent), followed by social justice, education and housing. Seventeen percent of party members work in the field of education and training, over 12 percent in IT, media and communications, 12 percent in health and care and 9 percent in the arts, culture and science. In the skilled trades, by contrast,

the figure is just under 4 percent.

Pseudo-left-wing groups, which have been active within the Left Party or its wider sphere for years, have also brought new members into the party. The Morenist group RIO, which had previously shied away from doing so, joined the Left Party in January this year.

The growth in the Left Party's membership is the superficial manifestation of a broader radicalisation. Many young and elder workers are also dissatisfied but show little inclination to join a party that has been a reliable pillar of the existing order for decades. The task of the party conference was to condition the party and its new members to curb this radicalisation, just as The Left Party has done repeatedly in the past.

In the 1990s, the Left Party's predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), had positioned itself at the forefront of the outrage over the industrial and social cutbacks in former Stalinist East Germany (GDR), only to then continue those cutbacks in East German state governments and in Berlin. In the 2000s, the PDS merged with a wing of the SPD to form Die Linke, in order to channel resistance against Agenda 2010—the social cuts of the SPD-Green federal government—which it then itself implemented at state level.

The result of this deceitful policy was the rise of the AfD. Many voters turned their backs in disgust on the Left Party, which was implementing right-wing policies under an umbrella of left-wing phraseology. The right-wing demagogues of the AfD were able to present themselves as an anti-establishment party. Now, in the face of a new wave of radicalisation, the Left Party is attempting to repeat this shabby manoeuvre once again.

The party executive presented a key motion to the party conference, which—with a few amendments—was adopted by a large majority. As we wrote on the WSWS, it combines criticism of social conditions with policies that are compatible with those of the Merz government—and, in some respects, the AfD. If one cuts through the mist of left-wing rhetoric, the key motion reveals itself to be a pro-capitalist, nationalist document that defends the interests of the ruling elites.

The AfD is set to win the state elections in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania due in September. The Left Party is responding by aligning itself even more closely with Chancellor Merz's CDU, the SPD and other bourgeois

parties, which have paved the way for the AfD through cuts to social services, anti-immigrant rhetoric and militarism. In Saxony and Thuringia, the Left Party is already supporting CDU-led minority governments. Now it wants to join such governments itself, describing this as a policy of “anti-fascist alliances.”

At the party conference, leading members performed a balancing act to reconcile the radical sentiments of younger delegates with this right-wing orientation. The media stood on the sidelines as watchdogs, shouting “foul” every time a red line was crossed.

The parliamentary group leader in the Bundestag, Heidi Reichinnek, once again proved herself a master of this tightrope walk. On the first day, she swept the delegates off their feet with one of her staccato speeches, sparking waves of enthusiasm. She railed against Chancellor Merz, Economic Minister Reiche, cuts to social services, restrictive asylum policies and other “government shenanigans.” She declared: “We’re not waging a culture war. We’re waging a class war. We’re raising the issue of distribution and ownership.” She railed against billionaires, demanded: “Tax the rich,” and declared the Left to be a “bulwark against fascism.”

But when things got serious on Sunday, it was Reichinnek who advocated cooperation with the CDU. When it became apparent that a majority was in favour of a motion ruling out any cooperation with the CDU, she ensured, with another impassioned speech, that it was defeated. “We are the bulwark against fascism, and that means making decisions we don’t like,” she said, justifying cooperation with the CDU. The “Lex Sachsen-Anhalt” resolution passed by the party conference now ensures that each regional association can decide for itself whether to cooperate with the CDU.

This behaviour is typical of Reichinnek. She had already helped Merz out of a tight spot during last year’s election for party leader. After he had surprisingly failed to win a majority in the first round of voting, she ensured that the election could be repeated on the very same day. Shortly before that, in a speech to the Bundestag that went viral on social media, she had fiercely attacked Merz for his cooperation with the AfD.

Luigi Pantisano, who will lead the Left Party in future alongside the current co-chair Ines Schwerdtner, nearly fell off the tightrope, however. Although there was no opposing candidate—his predecessor van Aken did not stand for re-election for health reasons—Pantisano received only 53 per cent of the delegates’ votes.

The architect and urban planner, who began his party career under former party leader Bernd Riexinger, had told the *Bild* tabloid paper that there was “absolutely no difference at the moment between the CDU, which pursues fascist policies, the AfD or the fascists themselves.”

That crossed the red line. Although Pantisano had spoken out in favour of cooperation with the CDU both before and after the conference, his statement sparked an outcry among the East

German regional associations and dominated media coverage of the party conference.

“Above all, one wonders whether he even realises the damage his words have caused. After all, any future attempt at reconciliation between the Left Party and the CDU is likely to be torpedoed by reference to his remarks,” the newspaper *Die Zeit* reprimanded. The weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* criticised: “In the state elections in September in the east, the AfD threatens to take power. But Die Linke, on whom things might actually depend this time, is in danger of making itself impossible for the other parties.” Several CDU politicians called for Pantisano’s resignation.

Pantisano immediately backtracked and apologised publicly. His statement that he currently saw no difference between the policies of the CDU and the AfD was “oversimplified and, in this form, incorrect,” he told the Deutsche Presse-Agentur, Germany’s main news agency. “I apologise for this, particularly to those in the CDU who repeatedly emphasise the need for a clear firewall against the AfD.”

The fact that a party conference resolution described the Israeli army’s actions in Gaza as “genocide” for the first time also caused a major stir. There were heated debates on this issue at the party conference. There were 128 amendments tabled to the executive committee’s main motion. However, the final version, adopted by a large majority, remains a compromise that condemns “the brutal crimes of Hamas” and Israel’s “genocide” in equal measure, invokes “Israel’s right to exist” and “Palestine’s right to exist,” and—like the federal government—advocates an imaginary two-state solution.

The Left Party, as the Potsdam party congress has once again demonstrated, was, is and remains a bastion of the capitalist order. Fascism, war and social cuts can only be stopped by a movement of the international working class that is independent of all established parties and fights for a socialist perspective. This is the policy of the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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