



Die Linke - squandered opportunity to break from reformism

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The Left Party (Die Linke) in Germany was founded in 2005 as a fusion of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor party to the former ruling Stalinist party of the German Democratic Republic (DDR), and a split from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), in what was previously the Federal Republic the Electoral Alliance for Work and Social Justice (WASG).

The response of the PDS to the collapse of the DDR was the adoption of a social democratic programme including a firm commitment to a ?social market economy? and ?parliamentary democracy?.

In the old East German Länder (federal states), the PDS was generally the second or third strongest parliamentary party throughout the 1990s. Its political method was made clear as early as 1994 when it supported an SPD-Green provincial government in Saxony. The PDS openly campaigned for a coalition with the SPD and this was realised in Mecklenburg in 1998-2006 and, most significantly, in Berlin between 2001 and 2011. Today, the Left Party remains in government in the state of Brandenburg. We will consider its record later.

It was the policies of the SPD and the Greens in government under Gerhard Schröder and Oskar Fischer, that opened up possibilities for a new left party. In 2003, they launched ?Agenda 2010?, consisting of harsh neoliberal reforms centred on the ?Hartz I-IV? laws. These slashed welfare, social insurance and unemployment provision ? leading the way to the growth of a large sector of precarious workers, mainly young. This proposal sparked a widespread revolt. In the East, regular ?Monday Demos? brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets. In the West in November 2003, the ?initiative of the trade union left? and the far left groups called an unofficial mass demonstration, which attracted over 100,000.

In the trade unions, shop stewards and local branches supported this initiative against the official position of the leadership. In effect, the SPD lost political control of a section of the lower levels of the trade union bureaucracy. In Schweinfurt, for example, the leader of the engineering union, IG Metall, Klaus Ernst, called for a political strike against Agenda 2010. This was the first call for a one-day political mass strike in an industrial region against an SPD government since the 1920s.

Resistance within the DGB led to the founding of two new initiatives in 2003: the ?Electoral Alternative 2006? and the ?Initiative for Work and Social Justice?. In November 2004 these came together in the Electoral Alternative for Work and Social Justice (WASG). Its first campaign was in the state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in May 2005 where it gained 2.2 per cent of the vote ? small but significant because this state is traditionally the heartland of the SPD.

At its high point, the WASG had more than 10,000 members, representing a wide range of political traditions stretching from former members of the SPD and the Greens, and middle ranking trade union officials to activists from the various far left groups and many from the Monday Demos protest movement against Hartz IV. From the beginning, it was a reformist organisation but it was riven with inner tensions.

The SPD-Green coalition paid dearly for their attacks on their own supporters and the next elections brought the Christian Democrats and Liberals to power.

For the general election in September 2005, the WASG and the PDS agreed a joint electoral intervention, and a commitment to the subsequent fusion to form the Left Party (Die Linke). The defection of Oskar Lafontaine, a former SPD finance minister and party chairperson, boosted the new political formation. He brought supporters from the SPD and the trade unions. He and Gregor Gysi, former head of government in the DDR, became the leading candidates of the joint electoral campaign.

The leadership from the former SPD and trade union officials wanted to create a 'real' electoralist party. Therefore they tried to ensure from the beginning that the party was tied to a programme of social reform and was controlled by a bureaucratic apparatus. On the other hand, many members were unemployed workers who, whilst mainly reformist, demanded more action and a commitment to mobilise for their immediate demands. They did not want to wait passively for elections and coalitions to bring reforms, they wanted an improvement of their social situation right now – particularly the abolition of the Hartz reforms.

Nevertheless it was the leadership who won out, not least because the far left groups within the WASG believed the party would inevitably have to be reformist to start with. So if the party had to be reformist why not leave experienced electioneers like Lafontaine and Gysi to get on with it? Thus the fusion was accomplished on their terms.

Electoral success seemed to vindicate it. In 2005, with 8.7 per cent, the Left Party was catapulted straight into the Bundestag and in 2009, with 11.9 per cent; even in the old West Germany it leapt over the 5 per cent electoral hurdle for the first time. Nonetheless this electoral surge soon faded. The Left Party, despite its nearly 5,000,000 votes did not turn to mobilising against the austerity packages, Hartz IV or the war in Afghanistan. Instead, it directed all its energies to trying to convince the SPD and the Greens to include them in a coalition.

At the level of the federal province they were indeed able to do this. In the provincial governments of Berlin, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and currently in Brandenburg, the Left Party showed itself willing to implement the SPD's policy. The only sign of 'left' influence was that in Berlin instead of the €1 per hour job, there is now the €1.50 per hour job – this is what the unemployed are paid, on top of the dole, for working.

Whilst in government in Berlin (2001-2011) and in Brandenburg (since 2009), the PDS and then the Left Party have carried out, or are planning to carry out the following attacks. In Berlin:

– Privatisation of 120,000 flats, more than half of all privatisations of public housing since 1945?

– Reduction of wages in the public sector by 10 per cent?

– Increase of weekly working hours for teachers by two hours (without any pay increase)?

– Rescuing of 'Berliner Bank' with taxpayers' money?

– Partial privatisation of water company?

– Privatisation of several hospitals?

– Privatisation of Berliner Sparkasse (local savings bank)?

– Implementation of federal legislation (Hartz laws, illegal migrant deportations, etc.)

In Brandenburg:?

– The SPD/Die Linke coalition plans a reduction of 15,000 jobs in public administration by 2015 (only teachers and police are exempt from this); the cuts will mainly affect social workers

– The Left Party now accepts increased police powers agreed by the former SPD/CDU government

? In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the SPD and Left Party actually increased police surveillance and rights against protesters ? as those who participated in the anti-G8 protests in Rostock in 2007 experienced.

Currently, the Party has about 63,000 members, the majority of them in the ?old? eastern states (which are less than a quarter of the population of Germany). It is only here that the Left Party is really a mass party. About half of the membership is pensioners and many of them former professionals or employees of the state apparatus of the old DDR.

In the East, the Left Party has social roots not only via front organisations, such as the youth organisation, Solid, and the student organisation, SDS, but also a strong influence, or outright control, of tenants' associations or popular assistance organisations like ?Volkssolidarität?. They also dominate unemployed organisations and most protest activities. The picture in West Germany is very different, although the party does have a certain influence in trade unions or in works councils.

The Left Party, then, is a party with real roots in the working class; but for a mass party, it is small in terms of membership. It represents the more politically active, but reformist members of the German working class and social movements. Nevertheless with the SPD now in coalition government with Merkel's Christian Democrats, it is likely that the Left Party could recover support, at least on an electoral level.

However, the party is firmly in the grip of a disproportionately large bureaucratic apparatus. It is not only electoralist in its strategy, but work in elected bodies constitutes most of the activity of the party and its members. Currently, the party has 250 deputies in European, federal and regional parliaments and, altogether, they employ at least 1,000 full-time ?advisors?/assistants.

There are also 386 members of local council executives, from mayors downwards, and 80 of them are working full-time. A further 5,000 members are deputies in local or district councils. In addition, the party's own bureaucracy is composed of several hundred full-timers.

Since a large part of the party membership are only ?paper? members, rarely attending party meetings, this layer of functionaries ? party officials and representatives in different levels of the bourgeois democratic state apparatus ? constitutes most of the active members of the party.

Conflicts and the left in the party

This also explains, why the ?entrant? far left groups within party are weak, if not marginalised. If anything, they are overrepresented on leaderships and in the parliaments, with little in the way of a base to back their left politics. ?This explains why many of them have chosen to support the mainstream, reformist leadership, rather than fight for a socialist programme.

The right wing, around platforms like the ?Democratic Socialism Forum?, clearly wants to push the party even further to the right ? to a policy similar to Schröder's ?Neue Mitte? or Blair's ?Third Way?. They are based in important sectors of the East German apparatus and deputies. For several years a number of their key leaders have been involved in ?explorative? talks with sectors of the left wing of the SPD and the Greens (and also some autonomists) to prepare the ground for a ?reform coalition?. For example, Katja Kipping, one of the current chairpersons of the party, whilst not a formal member of the right networks, leans in their direction.

The core of the leadership, around Gregor Gysi and Bernd Riexinger, has no fundamental dispute with the right. They are also opting for a future coalition with the SPD/Greens, but with more ?traditional? social democratic policies. The main problem they face is that the SPD and the Greens, fearing the opposition from the bourgeoisie, are not yet confident that the Left Party will be sufficiently ?reliable? because of its opposition to any deployment of German troops in imperialist interventions and because of its demand that Germany should leave NATO. Of course, the Left Party leadership has already signalled its preparedness to make concessions on this (last) remaining obstacle.

In the current discussion around the European elections, the Left Party leaders have made it clear that they have no

intention of questioning the existence of the institutions of the EU; they only want to 'reform' them and make them more democratic, which is little more than Hollande's promises for a 'different European' policy.

On the question of leaving NATO, Gysi has already said that this slogan should be dropped because it would only give a 'national answer' and should be replaced by a call for 'new international security structures'. This would not only mean dropping a concrete demand and promise, but also open the way to support for an alternative imperialist alliance. Already, on the question of Palestine, the Left Party has made clear its support for the German government's policy, when it banned all its deputies from supporting the Gaza flotilla, which wanted to break the embargo against Gaza, and when it declared its support for 'Israel's right to exist and defend itself' against an oppressed people.

Conclusion

The foundation of the Left Party during the government of Schröder and Fischer was a significant rift within organised reformism in German. Protesters from the anti-Hartz IV movement joined but this period of growth was almost exclusively confined to the WASG phase and came to an end with its fusion with the PDS.

For years now, membership numbers have been declining.

Certainly this is in part a result of the ageing membership in the former DDR but it also reflects the failure of the Left Party to attract new members in the West or to retain those that it did win. Given the new Grand Coalition, it may be able to re-strengthen itself in the coming parliamentary term as the only 'left' opposition to the government.

Should this be the case, it is more likely to strengthen the right wing leadership's commitment to its strategy of forming a 'centre-left' coalition with the SPD than to push the party onto a more radical and 'anticapitalist' path. To prove their 'reliability' to the SPD leaders, and behind them to German imperialism, the leadership will abandon more and more of its formally left positions. Having failed to oppose the adoption of a reformist programme or to present a revolutionary alternative, the 'lefts' within the Left Party will find themselves even more compromised; their strategy of accommodation to the right, always unprincipled, will also prove to be unproductive.

In short neither in its programme or its practice is Die Linke the kind of party that can effectively fight capitalism, let alone overthrow it. Where such a party exists, all experience has shown that the surest way for workers to see through its hollow promises is to put it to the test of office - i.e. to vote for it so that in opposition or in government its deeds will prove what it is.

However, in countries where a miniature bourgeois workers' party does not exist, there is certainly no reason to try to build one.

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