

# Germany's Left Party and Nichi Vendola offer their services to the European Union

By Johannes Stern  
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In the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, the German Left Party is offering its services to save the European Union, the euro and European capitalism. This was the main message of a meeting held by the Left Party in Berlin last Sunday.

Keynote speakers at the meeting of the Left Party in Kreuzberg, attended by about a hundred persons (mostly party members), were the chairman of the German Left Party, Klaus Ernst and Nichi Vendola, president of the Italian region of Apulia and leader of the alliance Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL).

The focus of their speeches was to warn that “official governments were incapable of dealing with the crisis in Europe” (Klaus Ernst) and therefore that a strong, new European left was necessary to save Europe and to establish it on new foundations (Nichi Vendola).

The meeting in Berlin by Ernst and Vendola is significant. Both men are seasoned politicians now being called upon to enforce the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets.

Klaus Ernst was a senior official of the IG Metall trade union and a member of the Social Democratic Party from 1974 to 2004 before co-founding the Election Alternative (WASG). The WASG's goal was to defuse popular resistance to the Hartz IV welfare reforms introduced by the SPD-Green government under Gerhard Schröder. He has been a member of the Left Party since 2007 and its chairman since 2010.

Ernst and the Left Party are now preparing to play a role in government at a federal level and impose drastic cuts. In Berlin, where the Left Party has governed in an alliance with the SPD for ten years, it has carried out unprecedented cuts in the city.

Nichi Vendola is as experienced as Ernst when it comes to implementing cuts. In 2005 he was appointed President of Puglia and joined the center-left coalition of Romano Prodi.

Vendola commenced his political career in the Youth League of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1972 and joined its central committee in 1990. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the PCI, which he opposed to the end, Vendola was a founding member of the Party of Refounded Communism (PRC).

The PRC became a rallying point for all sorts of ex-leftists on a completely unprincipled basis. The group showed its true character when it joined the government of Romano Prodi in 2006 and supported his welfare cuts and participation in the Afghan war. Just two years later, the PRC suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of voters and failed to re-enter parliament.

Vendola responded to this development with a further rightward shift. He resigned from PRC to found the SEL—a coalition of Christian Democrats, Stalinists, environmentalists and ex-radicals. Since then he has governed Apulia, making extensive social cuts and encouraging the exploitation of the region by local and international capital—particularly in the field of renewable energies.

Vendola's administration is so openly identified with the interests of big business that Emma Marcegaglia, president of the employers' association Confindustria, recently said: “Vendola is the best governor in southern Italy, Apulia is the region with the best management.”

As a leading representative of the Italian bourgeoisie, Vendola is regarded as a potential successor to the current Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who has come under increasing criticism for not being rigorous enough in enforcing a new round of savage austerity measures.

The demands raised by Ernst and Vendola in Berlin to “overcome the euro crisis” represent the logical continuation of their previous policy. The measures they propose are being discussed by all the bourgeois parties and are demanded by the financial elite. They have nothing in common with leftist or socialist politics.

Ernst called for the introduction of a European economic government, the issuing of eurobonds and for highly indebted countries to be allowed to borrow money directly from the European Central Bank (ECB) to remain solvent. The Left Party and the Left in Europe were “the only force that can ensure that Europe functions again.” A prerequisite for achieving such policies were “strong trade unions.” The depth of the crisis meant it was now necessary to act very quickly, “to get a grip on things somehow.”

Vendola also expressed concern about the crisis and urged the speedy establishment of a “new left” which he thought absolutely necessary for Europe. The crisis in Europe had “put

an end to the old concepts.” The model of the European welfare state established after the Second World War now hung “up for grabs.”

Evidently influenced by post-modern ideology, Vendola painted Europe’s future in apocalyptic colours. The “narrative of Europe” had turned into its opposite, the future is seen as “just a threat,” and Europe faced “explosion.”

The current rulers are “the least capable ruling class we’ve ever had.” Vendola then asked: “Where is an Adenauer, where is a Brandt? Where are the Christian and social democratic traditions of Europe?” The traditional forces of Europe have yielded up their commitment to a united Europe, meaning that a “new political left” was now in a position to advance this project, Vendola said.

Both speakers made clear that this “new left” was ready to cooperate with all sorts of political forces.

Vendola proclaimed: “Our parties are not sufficient to advance our policy,” and Ernst pointed out that all parties, including the conservatives, had now taken up the ideas of the Left Party. At a meeting he had held with Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), the chancellor had shared his views. This had to be “taken with a pinch of salt” but was basically a “huge step forward,” Ernst said. The Left Party had been able to “penetrate all social layers” and the task was to “secure its positions in all other parties.”

The demand for a European economic government and a strengthening of EU institutions is supported by the majority of business leaders and conservative parties in Europe. In a recent interview with the Berliner Zeitung the chairman of the Federation of German Industry (BDI), Hans-Peter Keitel, emphasized that the BDI was a “strong advocate of European integration.” The monetary union should not be jeopardized, even if it cost a great deal of money.

On Monday the head of Deutsche Bank, Josef Ackermann, addressed an audience of around 200 bankers and spoke out against Euro-skeptics, demanding a clear pro-European policy. “We need citizens to be clear that without the European Union, all European countries will politically and economically be marginal players in world politics in a few years.” He missed in the “public discussion a broader perspective that is not confined to working out limited aid packages with revenues drawn from currency exchange fees”.

The stance of Keitel and Ackermann differs little from that of Ernst and Vendola. In his speech, Ackermann even referred to the necessity of a few cosmetic changes to the financial markets. He questioned the “usefulness of many modern financial products” and declared that the banking industry should examine its “entire activity” to see if they were living up to their role as “genuine servants of the real economy.”

A European economic government would be nothing more than a mechanism to enforce the cuts demanded by the financial markets. Such a government would extend the devastating austerity measures already agreed in Greece,

Ireland and Portugal to all over Europe and dictate fiscal policy to individual EU members. For working people the consequences of such a regime would be just as destructive as the withdrawal from the euro openly advocated by nationalist forces.

In recent weeks the German government has been heavily criticized for being inconsistent in its policy regarding the euro. It is unclear whether the government coalition of the CDU, CSU and FDP will win a majority in parliament in the crucial vote on the enlargement of the euro bailout fund due on 23 September. Against this background there is already speculation in the media about a possible collapse of the coalition and the return of the SPD and the Greens to power.

Both parties advocate a European economic government—combined with a strict austerity program. The Left Party is prepared to support this course and if necessary to join such a government.

In an interview on German television a few days ago, Left Party leader Gregor Gysi, declared it was a problem that his party had “never been in federal government.” The Left Party had thereby been unable to prove it had the expertise, “to implement ready-made proposals.”

At the end of the meeting in Berlin, Vendola was asked by a member of the audience about how he would implement his “suggestions” in practice. A member of the Left party wanted to know how he dealt with the “tension between government and movement” as the president of Apulia. The Left Party in Berlin confronted the same problem because it ruled in the city Senate in an alliance with the SPD.

Vendola replied succinctly, that he never tried to force all social movements to endorse his decisions. He needed them as a left cover. “It would be my downfall when social movements cease to criticize me.” The Left Party in Berlin acknowledged this reply with thunderous applause.

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