

Germany's Left Party embraces policies of far-right AfD

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The Left Party's congress, which took place in Leipzig over the weekend, was dominated by a bitter conflict over refugee policy. The dispute erupted after Left Party parliamentary group leader Sahra Wagenknecht addressed the congress on Sunday. By a slim majority of 250 to 249 delegates, the congress voted for a one-hour debate on Wagenknecht's anti-refugee line. After around 100 delegates registered to speak, lots were drawn to determine who would be allowed to speak.

Wagenknecht, her husband Oskar Lafontaine and their supporters have long advocated a restrictive refugee policy barely distinguishable from that of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). They have repeatedly blamed refugees for the social crisis and sought to play them off against low-wage workers and Hartz IV welfare recipients.

For example, Wagenknecht defended the decision of the Tafel charity in Essen to accept only Germans as new members for its food distribution programme. She justified this by claiming that she did not want to expose people to such harsh competition when they had been living in Germany for so long.

A conflict has been raging in the party press for some time over Wagenknecht's AfD line on refugee policy. A number of pieces for and against Wagenknecht's position have appeared in the Left Party organ *Neues Deutschland*. In May, a group associated with the Socialist Left, the trade union-aligned faction of the party, published a paper in support of Wagenknecht that called for a "regulated left refugee policy."

The paper, which was signed by parliamentary deputies Fabio de Masi, Jutta Krellmann, Michael Leutert, and Sabine Zimmermann, as well as the chairman of the Cuba Network, Harri Grünberg, rejected "unrestricted immigration, which also includes those who merely want to earn more money and enjoy a better standard of living." The right to move and reside around the globe "is for a realistic left-wing refugee policy neither a guiding principle nor explicable to the broad sections of the population," according to the statement.

The party leadership around Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping refused to openly resist the xenophobic positions and wage a struggle over the issue at the congress. The main motion from the executive adopted by the congress contains the recognition of "open borders," like the party programme

adopted in 2011, but the formulation is so vague and unclear that even Wagenknecht felt able to vote for it.

Only when Wagenknecht insisted in her speech that there should be "limits for working immigrants" were there boos and shouts of protest. But the debate was hardly over before party leaders Kipping and Riexinger joined Wagenknecht and fellow parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch in front of the congress to proclaim their "unity."

It was "great that all four of us are standing here," declared Riexinger, before stating that a special conference on refugee policy would be organised and the issue discussed at a party meeting involving the executive and parliamentary group, i.e. the issue will be buried in the party's committees. Wagenknecht commented, "Let's focus on what makes us strong. Let's concentrate on the common ground."

The striving for "unity" is not the only reason why the Left Party is tolerating nationalist and xenophobic positions within its ranks.

Wagenknecht's opponents largely share her stance, but merely believe that the party should tone down this position publicly so as not to alienate potential voters who are disgusted by the government's openly xenophobic refugee policies and welcome refugees with sympathy.

It is noteworthy that the attack on Wagenknecht at the congress was initiated by Elke Breitenbach. She approached the microphone after the parliamentary group leader's speech and with affected outrage declared: "Sahra, you are tearing the party apart. You are ignoring the majority position in the party. I'm no longer willing to accept that."

Breitenbach is senator for integration, labour, and social affairs in the Berlin state government and has perfected the art of talking left while implementing right-wing policies. Breitenbach denounced federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer's plan to confine refugees to so-called anchor centers, while at the same time the Berlin government did exactly the same by doubling the spaces in its refugee centres from 2,000 to 4,000.

Thuringia, the only German state with a Left Party Minister President, occupies a leading position when it comes to the number of refugees deported. Thuringia's Minister President Bodo Ramelow defended this at the congress with the pathetic statement that he is merely implementing federal laws.

“For me, every deportation is a human loss,” claimed Ramelow. “There are federal laws that have to be enforced, and they are being enforced in a way that compels us to do things with police operations that I find disgraceful.” This is reminiscent of old Nazis who justified their conduct by saying they were just following orders.

The bitter faction fight within the Left Party is not a conflict between a left-wing and right-wing faction, but rather a dispute between several right-wing factions. This takes place within a party whose social orientation and class composition are changing rapidly.

Lafontaine and his supporters have long pursued the goal of creating with the Left Party a new edition of the SPD, whose support among workers evaporated after the SPD-Green government’s Hartz labour market reforms. Lafontaine, who was general secretary of the SPD until 1999, always viewed the party’s task as maintaining control over the working class and suppressing the class struggle.

However, with the intensification of global conflicts and social tensions following the world financial crisis of 2008, the perspective of reviving social democracy was exposed as hopeless. Lafontaine, Wagenknecht, and a faction of the trade union bureaucracy with which they are aligned adopted an openly nationalist policy, which combined calls for a strong state with an aggressive foreign policy to advance Germany’s interests.

By contrast, Kipping oriented towards the urban middle class, which is indifferent if not hostile towards the working class and has nowhere to go after the rightward shift of the Greens. These layers of the population are also shifting sharply to the right. However, they are taking the route of identity politics, including the #MeToo movement and other questions, rather than the openly nationalist slogans of the AfD.

The transformation of the Left Party’s membership reflects this new orientation. The membership of the PDS, the Left Party’s predecessor in the east, declined from 171,000 in 1991 to 61,000 in 2005. After the unification with Labour and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative (WASG), based in western Germany, the Left Party’s membership rose to 79,000 in 2009, only to fall to an historic low of 59,000 in 2016. Last year, the membership rose slightly to 62,000, above all due to new recruits from the urban middle class and in the west. For the first time, the Left Party now has more members in the western German states than in the states of the former East Germany.

In the east, where the Left party has participated in numerous state and municipal governments, the party has lost large numbers of disillusioned voters to the AfD. The membership is overwhelmingly elderly. In Mecklenburg-Pomerania, 44 percent of the membership is over 75. The figures in Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony are similar. In the west, however, there are hardly any members of this age. According to the party executive, the new members come from a milieu which is “academically educated and leans

to the left or left/green.”

That being said, the transitions between the various factions are fluid. The party leadership also maintains close ties to the trade union bureaucracy. Reiner Hoffmann, head of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), who was unable to attend the congress for health reasons, sent greetings that referred to the two Left Party leaders by their first names: “Dear Katja, dear Bernd, dear delegates, dear colleagues, I thank you warmly for your invitation to Leipzig!”

The direction in which the Left Party is travelling was made clearest of all by Gregor Gysi, who was party leader for many years and spoke to the congress as the president of the European Left.

Gysi warned against the growth of nationalism and cited the sentence “Workers of the world, unite!” from the Communist Manifesto. But he did not mean by this invocation the international unification of the working class in struggle against capitalism. Instead, his contribution culminated in the demand for “a united response from the European powers to the US’ trade war measures.”

Gysi made no reference in his speech to a guest and close ally who was hailed at previous Left Party congresses: Alexis Tsipras, the Greek Prime Minister and leader of Syriza. Tsipras has demonstrated what the defence of the European Union and collaboration with right-wing nationalists—he heads a coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks (Anel)—means in practice: vicious attacks on the social position and democratic rights of the working class, and support for militarism and war. The Left Party is preparing to play a similar role.

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