

Yellow vest protests expose right-wing politics of Germany's Left Party

By Isabel Roy and Johannes Stern
17 January 2019

The protests by “yellow vests” in France have exposed the anti-working class character of the Left Party in Germany. The Left Party leadership and its affiliated media reacted with hostility to the first mass demonstrations which took place in late November in Paris and other French cities.

“Language of Violence” was the title of the Left Party daily *Neues Deutschland* (ND) on November 26. The paper was not referring to the brutal actions of the French police and security forces, but rather to the mostly peaceful demonstrators who took to the streets to protest against higher fuel taxes and for higher wages and more social justice. “The ‘Yellow vest’ demonstrations which were not approved by the police have” degenerated into violence “and it took hours for the police ‘to restore calm,’” the paper complained.

For the Left Party leadership the biggest social protests in France since the general strike of 1968, and which developed outside the control of the unions and the established parties, were nothing less than a right-wing conspiracy. In early December, the co-chairman of the party, Bernd Riexinger, denounced the yellow vests on *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland* (RND), declaring: “The potential for the ultra-right in the ranks of the movement is worrying.” In Germany “such a fraternisation of left- and right-wing opinions is unthinkable.”

In mid-December, the Left Party then changed its official rhetoric. A statement by the party executive stated that the protests of the “yellow vests” were justified. One could see “a form of encouragement for Germany in the breadth of the social resistance.”

Shortly before Christmas, the party’s parliamentary group leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, posed in a yellow vest in front of the German Chancellery and feigned support for the protests. In a video message published on YouTube on December 23 and on the official website of her “Aufstehen” (“Stand Up”) movement, she said: “In

France, the movement of the yellow vests has given a voice to many who have been ignored by politicians for years. They are taking to the streets against a president of the rich and have at least won some initial concessions.”

The video could hardly be more cynical.

The concessions to which Wagenknecht refers are just window dressing and have already been largely conceded. The fact is Macron is sticking to his course, and using authoritarian methods to do so. Policemen have shot at the heads of demonstrators with tear gas grenades and rubber bullets, lashed out wildly and harassed journalists trying to film their outbursts of violence.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced a new bill on TF1 including: a ban on participation in demonstrations for identified “rioters” and a register of demonstrators. Every Saturday, the French government has mobilised tens of thousands of heavily armed police to brutally attack the “yellow vests.”

Wagenknecht’s attempt to suddenly portray herself as a critic or even an opponent of Macron and his “government of the rich” is utterly hypocritical. Wherever the Left Party co-governs in German states and administrations, it implements social cuts just as ruthlessly as the French government. It deports refugees and supports the build up of the state security forces. In the state of Brandenburg, the party supports plans for new, expansive police laws, which include providing police with hand grenades together with new, extensive restrictions on basic rights. In Berlin, the Left Party has implemented a social catastrophe as part of the city’s ruling coalition, and in Greece, its sister party Syriza is implementing the austerity dictates of the European Union to the detriment of the lives of millions of people.

The Left Party also considers Macron an ally at a European level. “One thing we need to take note of is that there is someone who is calling for discussion, for debate

on the perspective for Europe, in which top priority is given to Europe as a union for peace,” declared Dietmar Bartsch, the leader of the Left Party faction, last November following Macron’s speech on Europe in the German Bundestag. That is “something we expressly welcome as leftists.”

Wagenknecht’s husband and founder of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, also backed Macron in a post on his Facebook page, making clear what the Left Party and federal government expect from him. The French president has “got something right: if Europe wants to live in peace, it must, together with other countries, push back against US imperialism, which wants to dominate the world and ruthlessly enforce its interests,” Lafontaine wrote. The French president had stated: “We have to defend ourselves, with regard to China, Russia and even the United States of America.”

“Stand Up” and the Left Party are not suddenly embracing the “yellow vests” because they reject a policy of social cuts, but rather because they fear growing opposition among workers and young people in Germany. They aim to control such a development and lead it in a reactionary direction. Wagenknecht is pursuing this goal when she declares: “We also need many here who are ready to take to the streets. That is the purpose of “Stand Up,” and that’s what we’ll do next year. Let us work together against a government of the rich, against a policy for the rich, and to make our country socially just.”

Workers and young people in Germany, who have great sympathy with the “yellow vests” in France, have largely ignored Wagenknecht’s appeal. Even according to the organisers of the rally no more than 1,000 participants attended the first gathering of “Stand Up” in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. “Stand Up” is not a left-wing, anti-capitalist movement that allows workers to fight against “a policy for the rich” and “social justice,” but rather a right-wing nationalist initiative that explicitly scapegoats foreign workers and stands for coalitions with capitalist parties.

The founding document of “Stand Up” blames refugees for Germany’s social problems in the manner of the xenophobic Alternative for Germany. It criticises the refugee policy of the country’s ruling grand coalition (a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union (CSU), and Social Democratic Party) from the right. “Although the main reason for fears about the future is the crisis of the welfare state and global instabilities and dangers, the refugee issue has caused additional uncertainty,” it states. “The way in which

Merkel’s government is handling the challenges of immigration” is “irresponsible.” Politically, “Stand Up” functions as a front organisation for the established parties. “We belong to different parties” and we are “a nonpartisan rallying movement, in which each and everyone can play a role” reads the founding document.

Like the Left Party and its political allies in France—above all Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise (LFI)—“Stand Up” does not represent the interests of the workers, but rather the capitalist state and the affluent upper-middle class, who regard an independent worker’s movement against the reactionary policies of the ruling class as a threat to their own privileges.

This became very clear during the “Indivisible” demonstration last October when more than a quarter of a million people marched through Berlin to protest against racism, the rise to prominence of the AfD, and the right-wing politics of the federal government. Wagenknecht rejected the protest. The motto of the demo calling for “open borders for all” is a demand “that most people perceive as unreal and completely unrealisable,” she declared. It does not make the world “better,” Wagenknecht said cynically. She was subsequently praised by the leader of the far-right AfD, Alexander Gauland, as the “voice of reason.”

The extreme nationalist character of “Stand Up” and the Left Party confirms the stance of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International across Europe: the fight against social inequality, militarism and dictatorship requires the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist program and the construction of the Fourth International, which is irreconcilably opposed to the Left Party and all other petty-bourgeois and pseudo-left organisations.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>