

Germany: Left Party parliamentary group elects new leadership

By Peter Schwarz
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The Left Party group in the German parliament (Bundestag) re-elected its leaders last Tuesday. Sahra Wagenknecht, who had already announced her resignation as group chairperson in March due to burnout, did not stand for re-election. She was replaced by the largely unknown lawyer, Amira Mohamed Ali, who has been a Bundestag deputy for just two years. She was elected by a narrow margin. Dietmar Bartsch, who had shared the group chair with Wagenknecht, was re-elected. Although no one stood against him, he received only 64 percent of the votes cast.

As is usually the case with the Left Party, the election was marked by fierce power struggles, intrigues and clandestine agreements. The media routinely portray such hostilities as a struggle between different political currents, between “leftists,” “rightists,” “left socialists,” “reformers,” etc. Politically speaking, such designations make no sense.

The trench warfare within the Left Party is not due to fundamental political differences, but rather expresses tensions and frictions stemming inevitably from the right-wing turn undertaken by the whole party—from its attempt to dress up right-wing policies with demagogic left-wing phrases—and from the growing gulf between a reactionary, inflated apparatus with an ageing membership and the mass of the population, which is becoming radicalised and turning its back on the party. These are the typical symptoms of a party whose time has run out.

Just six weeks ago the Left Party suffered devastating electoral defeats in the states of Saxony and Brandenburg. The party was spared the same fate in Thuringia because the Left Party state prime minister, the only one in Germany, Bodo Ramelow, has moved so far to the right that many former Social Democratic Party, Green Party and Christian Democratic Union

voters were prepared to support him.

The absurdity of construing opposing “left”- and “right”-wing factions in the Left Party is clearly shown by the close and largely smooth cooperation between Bartsch and Wagenknecht at the head of the parliamentary group during the past four years.

Bartsch embodies the party’s right or “reform” wing, which is based on a layer of officials and civil servants responsible for budget cuts, cuts in social welfare and preserving law and order in the states and municipalities of eastern Germany.

Wagenknecht is regarded as the spokesperson for the party’s “left” wing, due to her occasional denunciations of social inequality. Her proposed remedies, however, are anything but left-wing. The economist with a doctoral degree began her political career as spokesperson for the arch-Stalinist “Communist Platform” in the forerunner of the Left Party, the Party of Democratic Socialism.

Since then she has long replaced Marx’s writings with the texts of the economists prevailing in the stock-conservative era of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1949 to 1963). She now sings the praises of the market economy and meritocracy. In recent years, she has scapegoated refugees and migrants, blaming them for Germany’s growing poverty and social problems. In doing so she won the praise of Alexander Gauland, leader of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany.

Four years ago, the followers of Bartsch and Wagenknecht formed a “horseshoe” alliance aimed primarily against the party’s leadership duo—the so-called “centre” led by Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping. The latter have oriented the party toward the wealthy urban middle classes who are primarily concerned with gender, climate change and lifestyle issues—the traditional themes of the Greens.

Wagenknecht's resignation from the leadership of the fraction will change nothing in this respect. Her successor Mohamed Ali is considered to be a follower of the Wagenknecht camp. According to the Berlin state broadcaster rbb, "The Wagenknecht wing wanted to install the former backbencher on the side of Dietmar Bartsch, to ensure the 'horseshoe' continues to function." The 39-year-old daughter of an Egyptian father and a German mother owes her election to support from the camp of Bartsch, which met with her in a Berlin restaurant the night before the election.

In a second round of voting Mohamed Ali defeated by 36 to 29 votes Caren Lay, who is regarded as an ally of party leader Katja Kipping. Lay, a 46-year-old graduate sociologist, began her political career as speechwriter for the Green Party environment minister, Renate Künast, in the former Social Democratic Party-Green Party government led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens). She then switched to the Left Party in 2004 to become first a state deputy and then a member of the federal parliament, in which she filled leading party offices.

The new fraction leadership, in which Bartsch will set the tone, ensures that the Left Party will continue its lurch to the right. Wagenknecht, who will keep her parliamentary mandate and has made clear she will continue to make public appearances, has already made this clear. She has recommended the Left Party in Thuringia start talks with the conservative CDU on a joint government. At stake was "a stable government," she told the broadcaster MDR. "The last thing people need is new elections."

The Left Party in Germany is taking the same road as its fellow international parties, which have emerged as rabid defenders of capitalist rule. The global aggravation of class contradictions leaves no room for political half-measures. In Greece, the Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras has pushed through the brutal austerity program dictated by the EU and international banks. In Spain, Podemos has just pledged unconditional support to the Social Democratic PSOE in suppressing Catalan nationalists and imposing austerity.

The struggle against social inequality, fascism and war requires the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of the anti-capitalist, socialist program advanced only by the Socialist

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