

Success After Success, but Clouds Loom on the Horizon: The Left Party in 2009

By Daniel Hough

Can the Left Party develop a program that will convince voters of its potential for continued success?

Can the success of red-red coalitions on the *Land* level transfer to the federal level?

The rise of the *Linke* (Left Party, LP) has been one of the most fascinating stories in twenty-first century German party politics. In 2005 it easily doubled the 2002 performance of its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), and there is every chance that it will register over 10 percent in the 2009 poll. Although admittedly much stronger in eastern Germany (25.3 percent in 2005) than in western Germany (4.9 percent), it has clearly made its first steps toward becoming an all-German socialist party. Since 2007 the LP has been able to enter western *Landtage* in Bremen (8.4 percent), Lower Saxony (7.1 percent), Hesse twice (5.1 and 5.4 percent), Hamburg (6.4 percent), and most recently, the home state of LP talisman Oskar Lafontaine, Saarland (21.3 percent). Furthermore, the Left Party also successfully completed its not uncontroversial merger with the Electoral Alternative for Social Justice (WASG) in June 2007. The LP, it would appear, is developing into a nationally significant force to be reckoned with.

When one scratches under the surface, however, it becomes clear that 2009 could quite conceivably be as good as it gets for Germany's newest political party. The LP is the product of a merger between two quite distinct political parties: the predominantly eastern German PDS, with its roots in the Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the GDR, and the much newer SPD off-shoot, the WASG (The Electoral Alternative: Labor and Social Justice). The underlying cultural clash that this merger spawned—with one group of relatively pragmatic eastern German *Realpolitiker* rubbing against another of predominantly western German old-school socialists—is just one reason why the new LP has not yet been able to craft a common program. Thus far it has subsequently been far easier to agree on what the LP is *against* rather than what it is for. This can only work for so long, and as—after the 2009 election—the LP's grandees sit down to write the party's new program, they will find that creating a common narrative and a common set of programmatic cornerstones will prove very difficult indeed.

The LP gained support in 2005, and it will do so again in 2009, largely on account of dissatisfaction with other parties and not because masses of voters were flocking to its (nominally socialist) cause. Even in the policy arena where the LP was granted the *most* competence to actually change things for the better in 2005—that of social justice—only a mere 19 percent of its electorate agreed that it had “significant problem solving competences.” Many LP voters were disgruntled SPD supporters who could, as and when the SPD “corrects” its right-ward drift, quite plausibly turn their back on the LP. If the LP is to be successful post-2009 it will subsequently have to convince both voters and the other parties that it is to be taken seriously in programmatic terms. This will involve the LP pulling off a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, it will have to continue to develop relationships with the Social Democrats and the Greens. It will—as groups such as the *Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus* from within the party have observed—have to find ways of governing, or at least working constructively, alongside both of these parties at the *Land* level in western Germany. Only then will it be able to make any form of contribution to changing society in a practical sense. On the other hand, the LP's whole political discourse is based on negative dismissals of much of what the SPD and Greens did in office between 1998 and 2005 (and, indeed, what the SPD has done in government with the CDU since then). As indicated above,

the LP still does not, over two years after its founding, have a party program and creating one will—for Germany’s most ideological of political parties—not be a straightforward task. The LP therefore still has a long way to go before it will be in a position to create a coherent and persuasive narrative of where it wants to take Germany.

Recent election successes should subsequently not deflect from the fact that the political project of the Left Party is a surprisingly difficult one to pin down. And, in truth, it has always been thus. The larger of the LP’s two predecessor parties, the PDS, regularly saw two broad groups fight it out (often in public) for the party’s heart and soul. Through the 1990s traditional Marxists joined (sometimes uneasy) forces with adherents of radical but unorthodox ideologies to face down reforming socialists. The reformers themselves were no homogeneous group, with “pragmatists” keen on enhancing the party’s parliamentary base and “modern socialists” more occupied with strategic and programmatic questions.

This complex ideological mosaic was further complicated when the PDS and WASG joined forces. The WASG’s legacy is noticeable within the LP in that two predominantly western German factions exist among the membership, and they exert considerable influence on the LP’s programmatic direction. They also have a not inconsiderable presence in the party’s executive committee (where 23 of the 44 members of the 2008-10 committee stem unambiguously from the western states). The first is made of experienced political activists who have spent many years working in the trade union movement and/or within the SPD. They support what were, in essence, social democratic themes of the 1970s, stressing protectionist policies based largely around Keynesian economics. Alongside them exists another group of predominantly western German activists that is ideologically diverse and, for the most part, politically inexperienced. Its members may well have been active in communist party groupings before they joined the Left Party, and many of them have had little or no experience of working within larger political entities. This group’s political naivety has recently led the LP into a number of embarrassing situations, as some of their members either articulate off-message policies or simply behave in politically inappropriate ways. Examples include a member of the Lower Saxony state parliament claiming in February 2008 that Germany should introduce a secret service along the lines of East Germany’s fearsome Stasi, while others, in Hesse, openly compared in August 2008 the behavior of German soldiers in Afghanistan with those at the Berlin Wall. A text message scandal in Bremen in January 2008—where the leader of the party in parliament was, among other things, accused of stalking his deputy—also did little for the LP’s standing there.

In terms of policy platforms, the pre-LP PDS differed from the other German parties with regard to its anti-capitalist, overtly eastern German, political platform. The PDS attempted to develop socialist alternatives to what it described as the neo-liberal hegemonic consensus, basing its agenda on a commitment to social justice (including a strong commitment to redistributive tax policies), a commitment to the international peace movement (including such things as the dissolution of NATO and forbidding German soldiers to be active overseas), and a strong defense of “eastern German interests.” Despite its radical positions clearly challenging the mainstream consensus, the PDS nonetheless entered a coalition with the SPD at the regional level in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in 1998 and three years later it did the same in the city-state of Berlin. Indeed, it was returned to power in both of these states in the elections in 2002 and 2006, respectively.

Yet, finding *any* sort of ideological and programmatic clarity has proven to be a tortuous process within the new party. Long-standing groups such as the Communist Platform, Anti-Capitalist Left, and Marxist Forum have—despite not being numerically particularly strong—been strengthened by the merger, and they enjoy a significant public profile and a considerable presence in the *Linke’s* executive committee; former members of the German Communist Party such as Wolfgang Gehrcke and Harald Werner sit alongside

radical leftists like Christine Buchholz and Janine Wissler, while Sahra Wagenknecht and Thiess Gleiss of the prominent *Antikapitalische Linke* are also members. These groups enjoy an institutionalized status that prevents the leadership from ignoring them, and ensures that neo-Marxist voices (in all their diversity) still get a hearing. The new LP continues to have a small but vociferous “alternative” wing that has also, if anything, been enriched during the merger process. This group is quite disparate of itself, with anti-globalization protestors mixing with left-wing libertarians. They are not, however, without influence; six members of the 2008-2010 executive have links, for example, with the globalization-critical movement ATTAC.

This picture is complicated yet further by the myriad of other voluntary organizations that all push slightly different agendas; some are officially sanctioned, while others continue to wait to hear if they have met the LP’s criteria for achieving “official” status. They have the right to shape their own programmatic profile and to decide upon their own organizational structures and, providing that they do not contravene any of the core principles of the party’s statute, they enjoy considerable autonomy. In August 2009 there were twenty-four officially sanctioned groups, including the reform-orientated Forum of Democratic Socialism (*Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus*), the Socialist Left (*Sozialistische Linke*), and the Communist Platform (*Kommunistische Plattform*). There were also fifteen that had applied to be granted this status (including the *Marxistisches Forum*). There are also some groups who have not yet sought it at all (such as the *Antikapitalistische Linke*). Even the most cursory of glances through these groups’ lists of demands, claims, wants, and needs illustrates the ideological and programmatic diversity with which the party leadership is subsequently confronted.

This disparate base is the principal reason behind the Left Party’s lack of genuine programmatic substance. During the early 1990s the mosaic of AGs (working groups) and IGs (interest groups) used to work as programmatic think tanks, churning out ideas and proposals that the PDS’s leadership would then take up and consider. But by as early as the mid-1990s parliamentarians and their staffs in the *Bundestag* and the eastern *Landtage* were taking on more prominent policy-drafting functions. The “programmatic guidelines” published in 2007—and this is the nearest document that the current LP has to a program—nonetheless talk of a “strategic triangle” of aims that the party should be pursuing. The triangle is formed of societal protest on the one hand, ideas for developing alternatives within contemporary capitalism on the other, and, finally, the creation of future socio-economic paths over and above current capitalist constraints.

The LP’s political project appears to be based on three broad sets of convictions. First, there is a strong, consistent, and rigid criticism of Germany’s social market economy and, over and above this, of the rather nebulous concept of neo-liberalism. Second, the LP stresses—much as the PDS did before it—a radical pacifist agenda, emphasizing the importance of withdrawing German troops from conflict zones around the globe—no matter why they are there. Finally, the third core tenet of the LP’s self-understanding is very clear denunciation of “bad guys” (namely managers, economic elites, big businessmen) and “good guys” (the laboring classes in Germany, the poor and downtrodden in the third world, and left-wing movements everywhere). The “Guidelines” are more anti-capitalist than the PDS’s last party program (the so-called “Chemnitzer Programm,” published in 2003) and they are in many ways more radical in the demands that are made. Indeed, as German political scientists Eckhart Jesse and Jürgen Lang have pointed out, the programmatic demands in the “Guidelines” are “more social than the SPD, more green than the Greens and—in the area of inner-German security at least—more liberal than the FDP!” The list of demands made range from free education and nursery places to a guaranteed basic income for all; from national minimum wages to sweeping increases in tax rates for companies and high earners.

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The 2009 election campaign has therefore been a relatively straightforward one for the LP. It has distanced itself from the Grand Coalition and has made a list of clear demands that it knew were frequently too much for any potential coalition partner to stomach. Germany will not be pulling its troops immediately out of Afghanistan, it will not be withdrawing from NATO any time soon, and it will not be demanding that EU-wide referenda take place on all future EU treaties. That having been said, the SPD and the LP now have more in common—at least in terms of the general thrust of their socio-economic policies—than many of their politicians care to admit. Both parties want a national minimum wage, their tax and spend agendas are no longer miles apart, and they instinctively want to protect much of the German economy from the tribulations of the global credit crunch. Furthermore, and whisper it quietly, but politicians from the two parties get on pretty well, particularly at the *Land* level. The only exception to this—and in truth it remains *the* biggest hindrance to a red-red coalition at the national level—is the existence of Oskar Lafontaine as one of the LP’s leaders. Lafontaine’s role in establishing the LP is hard to underestimate, but while he is there the SPD will not countenance working in coalition with the LP. So, in 2009 this is off the agenda. Whether it will be in 2013 is, however, another matter.

The LP has a lot of work to do before it gets to that stage though. Alongside the challenge of constructing a party program and keeping all the various factions in check, the LP needs to work out who its next generation of leaders are likely to be. Former members of the PDS will be feeling a dangerous sense of *déjà vu*, as this was one of the major challenges that the PDS could not meet following its 1998 election triumph. Indeed, the PDS’s failure to find adequate replacements for Lothar Bisky (who remains, alongside Lafontaine, joint-leader of the LP) and Gregor Gysi would almost certainly have seen them drift into oblivion had the Agenda 2010 and WASG not come along in 2003-2005. Bodo Ramelow, the impressive architect of the merger process and leader of the LP in Thuringia (where the LP recently polled 27.4 percent of the vote in a regional election), is an up-and-coming star, but others who were apparently destined for the top—such as Katja Kipping, Petra Pau, and Dietmar Bartsch—seem to be better suited as a support act rather than as the star turn. The influence of western German former WASG members such as Klaus Ernst, Thomas Händel, and Ulrich Maurer is also likely to remain substantial but, again, whether any of them have what it takes to follow in the footsteps of Lafontaine and Gysi remains to be seen.

The LP has, therefore, had it pretty good in recent times. Since 2005 election successes have come easily, and all of this without the LP having to put too many of its—often very vague—ideas into practice. This will change post-2009. And whether the LP is up to meeting the challenge that this poses remains to be seen.

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