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Christoph Vandreier

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Germany's “Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance”: A stale attempt to save capitalism

As farmers were protesting against the coalition government on the streets of Berlin, train drivers were preparing to go on strike because of the cuts in real wages imposed on them and demonstrations against German support for the genocide in Gaza were taking place almost daily, politicians and functionaries were meeting behind the closed doors of a Berlin hotel to launch the new party “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit” (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance—Reason and Justice, BSW).



Ralph Suikat, Lukas Schoen, Amira Mohamed Ali and Sahra Wagenknecht at a press conference on 23 October 2023 [AP Photo/Markus Schreiber]

At the press conference that followed, frontwoman Wagenknecht made it unmistakably clear that she was in no way interested in developing resistance to Germany's hated

coalition government, but rather in directing it into right-wing channels and suppressing it. Deputy chairman Shervin Haghsheno stated unequivocally that the new party's main concern was to stop the "alarming development" that the majority of the population had lost confidence in the establishment parties.

Wagenknecht announced that the BSW could enter coalition governments after the state elections in eastern Germany. The deputy parliamentary group chairman of the BSW in the Bundestag, Klaus Ernst, later added that coalitions with the three parties comprising the current federal government—Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats (FDP), Greens—nor with the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU) could be ruled out.

The BSW is seeking to collaborate with the very parties that have declared the genocide in Gaza to be an affair of state, and which are once again sending German tanks against Russia 79 years after the Second World War and have caused unprecedented social devastation in recent years. The BSW's aim is not to end these policies, but to enforce them more effectively. This can be seen in the positions they presented as well as in the right-wing and worn-out personnel that Wagenknecht has brought on board for her project. At the press conference, the representatives of the new formation declared in unison that they were not building a left-wing party. "We have deliberately said that we are not a Left Party 2.0," explained Fabio De Masi, a former Left Party parliamentarian and now the designated BSW lead candidate for the European elections. The BSW said it wanted to be a broad-based "people's party," in which even long-standing CDU voters who value social partnership were also welcome.

In terms of its economic policies, the BSW does not differ significantly from the establishment parties. The phrases about "social justice" and "opportunities for advancement" are merely accompaniments to a radically pro-capitalist and nationalist programme that celebrates the capitalist market economy and claims that the growth of German companies serve the common good. The BSW wanted to provide massive financial support for "domestic industry" and "future technologies made in Germany," it said.

While companies are promised billions in subsidies, the new party is fully behind the federal government's social attacks. This is what the second lead candidate for the European elections, former mayor of Düsseldorf Thomas Geisel, stands for in particular. A few months ago, Geisel wrote a pamphlet celebrating the SPD-led Schröder government's "Agenda 2010" policies of welfare cuts and worsening labour legislation, claiming this had put Germany on course for growth. He demanded unemployed people who could in

principle work should not any receive state support and that the retirement age should be raised further.

At the press conference, the former Social Democrat emphasised these demands, which amount to the unemployed being forced into the lowest-paid sweatshop jobs, further lowering overall wage levels. Those who received state benefits also had a duty to accept work, declared Geisel. De Masi also defended young unemployed people's "duty to cooperate" and thus the regime of sanctions and wage suppression.

The deeply anti-working class character of the new party is most evident in its unspeakable scapegoating of refugees, which took up by far the most space at the press conference. While the BSW supports the social attacks, it wants to make the weakest members of society responsible for the devastating effects of this policy. Wagenknecht does not blame the policies that have been carried out in the interests of the rich for the lack of housing and an overstretched infrastructure, such as a lack of nursery places, but rather the "failed integration" of refugees. "These problems have been denied for years. But they are real," says Wagenknecht.

The solution was to significantly reduce the number of immigrants, according to the BSW representatives. To this end, the party wants to introduce asylum procedures at the EU's external borders and in third countries, thus making Fortress Europe even more impenetrable. Geisel even claimed that the "individual right to asylum," which had been written into the German constitution as a result of the experiences of Nazi rule, was unsuitable today because it opened the doors to uncontrolled immigration. De Masi complained that the mass deportations of immigrants planned by the government were "logistically difficult." Measures must therefore be taken to reduce the incentives to come to Germany in the first place, he said.

The BSW also has only tactical differences with the other parties in the Bundestag when it comes to foreign policy. The alliance speaks for sections of the ruling class who see their own business interests threatened by the confrontation with Russia and who want to immediately adopt a policy that is more independent of the US. Wagenknecht therefore called for peace negotiations with Russia and criticised the sanctions policy. This has nothing to do with an anti-militarist standpoint. The party programme explicitly calls for the Bundeswehr (armed forces) to be "adequately equipped." At the press conference, Di Masi attacked former defence minister Ursula von der Leyen for not having rearmed Germany effectively enough.

The militaristic attitude is particularly evident in dealing with the genocide in Gaza. The German government is supporting and financing the brutal massacre of thousands of children, women and men to assert its own economic interests in the region. The BSW deputies in the Bundestag, who were still members of the Left Party at the time, also voted unanimously in favour of the solidarity resolution with Israel on October 10 and gave the Netanyahu government carte blanche for its genocide.

At the press conference, none of the BSW representatives saw the need to address this central issue. Only when Wagenknecht was asked about her position after more than two hours did she make a short statement in which she blamed Israel and Hamas equally for the violence and called for a ceasefire. She did not say a word about the foul role of the German government, the massive restriction of democratic rights and the media campaign against opponents of the war.

Wagenknecht's solidarity with the federal government is a direct result of the logic of her pro-capitalist and nationalist programme. Her plea for an independent Europe that was not "crushed between the USA and the increasingly self-confident new power bloc around China and Russia," but instead pursued a self-confident policy in its own interests, itself amounts to a declaration of trade war and war. Even the countless phrases about "détente" and "international cooperation" cannot disguise this.

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Wagenknecht's right-wing programme is not a break with the traditions of the Left Party but stands in direct continuity with its previous work. It is the third incarnation of a party that was already hostile to the working class 35 years ago when it was the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany, and which is now taking on openly reactionary forms under conditions of a deep capitalist crisis and mounting imperialist aggression.

The renaming of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) as the "Party of Democratic Socialism" (PDS) in February 1990 served the old Stalinist bureaucrats to push through the restoration of capitalism and suppress any opposition to it. The party's long-time honorary chairman and last head of government in East Germany, Hans Modrow, saw his task as

“preserving the governability of the country, preventing chaos.” Wagenknecht had joined the SED in the summer of 1989 and was elected to the PDS party executive in 1991.

When the PDS was ejected from the Bundestag in 2002 because of its right-wing policies and its unreserved support for social cuts in the state governments in which it was involved, the WASG (a split-off from the SPD) came to its aid. Wagenknecht’s current husband, former long-standing SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine, played a key role in merging the PDS and WASG into the Left Party and distancing the party’s name from socialism. The Left Party was supposed to absorb the discontent the SPD had caused with its “Agenda 2010” policies and the deployment of the Bundeswehr for the first time in war, and thus defend capitalism. Wagenknecht was at the forefront of the new formation as a lead candidate and parliamentary group leader.

After initial electoral success, the Left Party also quickly lost support because its left-wing slogans could not conceal its right-wing policies of social cuts. In the last federal elections, it fell below the 5 percent hurdle for entry into the Bundestag. Now Wagenknecht is once again trying to channel dissatisfaction and is no longer even pretending to be left-wing. In view of the enormous increase in social inequality and the aggressive pro-war policy, there is no longer any room for such manoeuvres. Wagenknecht is therefore increasingly openly replacing “social” phraseology with xenophobic agitation and German nationalist slogans. She is very consciously mobilising the dregs of society in order to turn them against the opposition in the working class.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Left Party is fully on the side of the federal government, courting the urban middle classes with the Greens on lifestyle issues and eagerly participating in social cuts, the mass deportation of refugees and stepping up the powers of the state, despite all the polls.

Workers must confront Wagenknecht’s third rehash of the stale attempt to save capitalism with open hostility. The BSW does not oppose the government’s policy of war and social cuts, but underpins it. The only way to oppose militarism, prevent a third world war and defend social rights is through the international mobilisation of the working class against capitalism. No problem can be solved without breaking the power of the banks and corporations and bringing them under democratic control. Such a movement requires the unification of workers across all national, ethnic and religious boundaries.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is fighting for this perspective together with its sister parties of the Fourth International around the world. If

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