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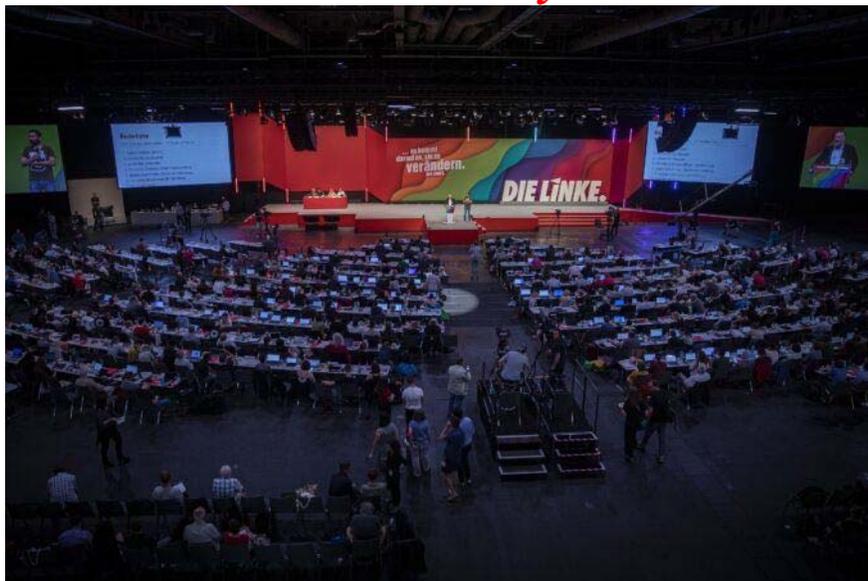
European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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26.01.2024

The Entry of a New German Left Party Shakes up the Country



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In October 2023, 10 members of the German parliament (Bundestag) left Die Linke (the Left) and declared their intention to form their own party. With their departure, Die Linke's parliamentary group fell to 28 out of the 736 members of the Bundestag, compared to the 78 members of the far-right Alliance for Germany (AfD). One of the reasons for the departure of these 10 MPs is that they believe that Die Linke has lost touch with its working-class base, whose decomposition over issues of war and inflation has moved many of them into the arms of the AfD. The new formation is led by Sahra Wagenknecht (born 1969), one of the most dynamic politicians of her generation in

Germany and a former star in Die Linke, and Amira Mohamed Ali. It is called the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance for Reason and Justice (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, BSW) and it launched in early January 2024.

Wagenknecht's former comrades in Die Linke accuse her of "conservatism" because of her views on immigration in particular. As we will see, though, Wagenknecht contests this description of her approach. The description of "left-wing conservatism" (articulated by Dutch professor Cas Mudde) is frequently deployed, although not elaborated upon by her critics. I spoke to Wagenknecht and her close ally—Sevim Dağdelen—about their new party and their hopes to move a progressive agenda in Germany.

Anti-War

The heart of our conversation rested on the deep divide in Germany between a government—led by the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz—eager to continue the war in Ukraine, and a population that wants this war to end and for their government to tackle the severe crisis of inflation. The heart of the matter, said Wagenknecht and Dağdelen, is the attitude to the war. Die Linke, they argue, simply did not come out strongly against the Western backing of the war in Ukraine and did not articulate the despair in the population. "If you argue for the self-destructive economic warfare against Russia that is pushing millions of people in Germany into penury and causing an upward redistribution of wealth, then you cannot credibly stand up for social justice and social security," Wagenknecht told me. "If you argue for irrational energy policies like bringing in Russian energy more expensively via India or Belgium, while campaigning not to reopen the pipelines with Russia for cheap energy, then people simply will not believe that you would stand up for the millions of employees whose jobs are in jeopardy as a result of the collapse of whole industries brought about by the rise in energy prices."

Scholz's approval rating is now at 17 percent, and unless his government is able to solve the pressing problems engendered by the Ukraine war, it is unlikely that he will be able to reverse this image. Rather than try to push for a ceasefire and negotiations in Ukraine, Scholz's coalition of the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Free Democrats, say Dağdelen, "is trying to commit the people of Germany to a global war alongside the United States on at least three fronts: in Ukraine, in East Asia with Taiwan, and in the Middle East at the side of Israel. It speaks volumes that Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock even prevented a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza at the Cairo summit" in October 2023.

Indeed, in 2022, Thuringia's prime minister and a Die Linke leader, Bodo Ramelow, told Süddeutsche Zeitung that the German federal government must send tanks to Ukraine. When Wagenknecht called Gaza an "open-air prison" in October 2023, the Die Linke parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch said that he "strongly distanced" himself from her (the phrase "open-air prison" to describe Gaza is used widely, including by Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967). "We have to point out what is happening here," Dağdelen tells me, "It is our duty to organize resistance to this collapse of Die Linke's anti-war stance. We reject Germany's involvement in the U.S. and NATO proxy wars in Ukraine, East Asia, and the Middle East."

Controversies

On February 25, 2023, Wagenknecht and her followers organized an anti-war protest at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin that drew 30,000 people. The protest followed the publication of a "peace manifesto," written by Wagenknecht and the feminist writer Alice Schwarzer, which has now attracted over a million signatures. The Washington Post reported on this rally with an article headlined, "Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany." Dağdelen tells me that the bulk of those who attended the rally and those who signed the manifesto are from the "centrist, liberal, and left-wing camps." A well-known extreme right-wing journalist, Jürgen Elsässer tried to take part in the demonstration, but Dağdelen—as video footage shows—argued with him and told him to leave. Everyone but the right-wing, she says, was welcome at the rally. However, both Dağdelen and Wagenknecht say their former party—Die Linke—tried to obstruct the rally and demonized them for holding it. "The defamation is intended to construct an enemy within," Dağdelen told me. "Vilifying peace protests is intended to put people off and simultaneously mobilize support for repugnant government policies, such as arms supply to Ukraine."

Part of the controversy around Wagenknecht is about her views on immigration. Wagenknecht says that she supports the right to political asylum and says that people fleeing war must be afforded protection. But, she argues, the problem of global poverty cannot be solved by migration, but by sound economic policies and an end to the sanctions on countries like Syria. A genuine left-wing, she says, must attend to the alarm call from communities who call for an end to immigration and move to the far-right AfD. "Unlike the leadership of Die Linke," Wagenknecht told me, "we do not intend to write off AfD voters and simply watch as the right-wing threat in Germany continues to grow. We want

to win back those AfD voters who have gone to that party out of frustration and in protest at the lack of a real opposition that speaks for communities.”

The point of her politics, Wagenknecht said, is not anti-immigration as much as it is to attack the AfD’s anti-immigrant stand at the same time as her party will work with the communities to understand why they are frustrated and how their frustration against immigrants is often a wider frustration with cuts in social welfare, cuts in education and health funding, and in a cavalier policy toward economic migration. “It is revealing,” she said, “that the harshest attacks on us come from the far-right wing.” They do not want, she points out, the new party to shift the argument away from a narrow anti-immigrant focus to pro-working-class politics.

Polls show that the new party could win 14 percent of the vote, which would be three times the Die Linke share and would make BSW the third-largest party in the Bundestag.

This article was produced by Globetrotter.

Vijay Prashad’s most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power (New Press, August 2022).

CounterPunch 25.01.2024