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# AN INSIDE LOOK AT GERMANY'S LEFT PARTY

By Cornelia Hildebrandt

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## **Germany's Left Party: Where to Go from Here?**

The German political party DIE LINKE (Left Party) was established in 2007 as a merger of two previously independent parties: the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), founded in 1990 and predominantly anchored in East Germany, and the Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice (WASG), founded in 2004 in the western part of the Republic. Since it was founded, the party has raced from success to success in state as well as national elections, the high point being its reelection to the Bundestag in 2009 with 11.9% of the votes for 76 seats. That success definitively established the party and fundamentally changed the German political landscape.

Ultimately, however, the party has had to accept losses in the state assembly elections. Its position is paradoxical: In a situation where the financial and economic crisis, austerity policies within the European Union, ongoing attacks on social achievements, and the participation of the German military in the war in Afghanistan should benefit a progressive approach based on generally accepted ideas, DIE LINKE has to fight to maintain popularity.

Cornelia Hildebrandt, deputy director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Institute for Social Analysis, studied DIE LINKE's situation—its creation and position within the party system, its voters, and its members—prior to its last party conference in June 2012, when a new party leadership, led by co-chairs Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, was elected. Hildebrandt particularly focuses on internal party discussions about controversial issues: analysis of capitalism and distribution of property, interests and key internal party questions, and the ongoing debate around participation in the government on a state level.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2012*

# An Inside Look at Germany's Left Party

By Cornelia Hildebrandt

The Left Party in Germany (DIE LINKE) refuses to resign itself to a world in which “profit interests determine the prospects of millions of men and women and in which exploitation, war and imperialism cut whole countries off from hope and the future.” The Left Party will join with trade-union forces, social movements, other left-wing parties, and citizens of Germany, Europe and the world in the search for a social alternative, “to build a society of democratic socialism in which reciprocal recognition of the freedom and equality of every individual is the condition for the development of all in solidarity.”<sup>1</sup> Thus did the Left Party formulate its strategic approach in its new Party Programme of 2011.

Three basic ideas must be brought together here: First, individual freedom and personal development for each individual through social equality of participation in the conditions of a self-determined life in solidarity; second, the subordination of the economy and ways of living to the development of solidarity and the preservation of nature; and, third, the realization of these two ideas through an emancipatory process “in which the supremacy of capital is overcome by democratic, social and ecological forces, and a society based on democratic socialism comes into being.”<sup>2</sup> The following article is intended to show the Left Party's potential for pursuing such an ambitious path.

## Place in the Party System

The Left Party in Germany has transformed the party system. With its stable presence since 2005, confirmed by the Bundestag elections of 2009, Germany's fluid five-party system congealed into a structure with two large mass parties, the CDU (conservatives) and the SPD (social democrats), and three medium-sized parties, the Greens, the FDP (liberals), and the Left Party. All five parties are in open competition with one another, and there is no structural asymmetry; i.e. neither the bourgeois conserva-

tive-liberal camp, nor a potential left-wing camp consisting of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, has a structural majority. “The fluid character describes a tendency of open coalition options, which has changed radically due to the fact that the ability of the mass parties to keep a grip on their support has eroded over the years, and due, too, to the founding of the new Left Party.”<sup>3</sup> Whereas in 1998 the two mass parties, the CDU and the SPD, represented 37.5 mil-

1 Programme of the DIE LINKE Party. Resolution of the Party Congress, Erfurt, 21 to 23 October 2011, approved through a vote by the party membership on December 2011. To download, see: [www.die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/dokumente/englisch\\_die\\_linke\\_programm\\_erfurt.pdf](http://www.die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/dokumente/englisch_die_linke_programm_erfurt.pdf).

2 Ibid.

3 Horst Kahrs (2009): Zwei Gewinner ein Absturz (Two winners, one crash); an intermediate assessment for the Parties and Social Movements Discussion Circle of the RLS, [www.rosalux.de/themen/parteien-demokratie/specials/parteien-und-soziale-bewegungen/deutsch/parteien-and-bewegungen/wahlanalysen/zwei-gewinner-ein-absturz.html](http://www.rosalux.de/themen/parteien-demokratie/specials/parteien-und-soziale-bewegungen/deutsch/parteien-and-bewegungen/wahlanalysen/zwei-gewinner-ein-absturz.html).

lion voters, or 76.1% of the votes cast (and 61.7% of the entire electorate), by 2009 these proportions had fallen to 24.6 million votes, 56.8% of the vote (and 39.7% of the entire electorate), meaning that they had lost one third of their votes since 1998. The result has been an increasing need for three-party coalitions. Attempts to form a “red-red-green” governing coalition failed in the state election in Hesse in 2008, because the SPD rejected any participation in government by the Left Party or even a government tolerated by it. In the Saarland in 2009, the possibility of a “red-red-green” coalition was torpedoed by the Greens, whose ouster from the state parliament had been seen by the Left Party as “the best guarantee of a change of government.”<sup>4</sup> With the early collapse of the conservative-liberal-green state government in 2012, the only option not open as the state moved into new elections was an SPD-Left Party coalition, now due to an SPD veto.

In the 2009 Bundestag elections, the Left Party became the fourth strongest party, with 11.9% of the vote and 76 seats in the German Bundestag. It also has eight representatives in the European Parliament, in the GUE/NGL Group, almost 200 in 11 of the 16 state parliaments, and over 6200 local council seats.

The decisive factor in the Left Party's success in the Bundestag elections was the social question. The party attracted votes as an all-German protest party against the dismantling of social systems and of democracy under the so-called Agenda 2010, and as the party which could ensure decent wages, the dignity of labor, the security of old age pensions, and good educational policy. Most Left Party voters were blue-collar workers, unemployed, trade unionists and pensioners. One unemployed person in four voted for the Left Party. It is increasingly tending to become a “men's party”, with 13.3% of the male

4 Oskar Lafontaine: Rot-rote Mehrheit und Regierungswechsel möglich bei Scheitern der Ökopartei (Red-red majority change of government possible if Eco-Party fails), *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 5, 2009.

vote in 2009, versus 10.6% of the female vote. However, it has been unable to reach social libertarian voter groups in equal measure. Its electoral results in its former West German bastions—e.g. the university towns—are failing to meet expectations.

Moreover, the success of the Left Party was connected with a political power option of the party as part of a possible political project to prevent a conservative-liberal government, although even the most minimal preconditions, in terms of party politics, for a red-red-green project at the federal level were absent. The political dilemma—as Jörg Prella pointed out in his analysis of the election results for Hesse—was that “many comrades had actually been counting on a boost from quite a different direction: a boost from the ‘streets’ as a public reaction to the crisis”.<sup>5</sup> The parliamentary strengthening of the Left Party since its founding in 2007 has so far not been accompanied by any strengthening of extra-parliamentary resistance.

One thing that distinguishes the Left Party from all the other parties is that it has to perform contradictory functions in the German party system, as a result of the persistent regional differences between the electorates in eastern and western Germany. Thus, in the 2009 Bundestag elections, the Left Party won an average of 26.4% of the vote in the six eastern states, becoming the strongest or second strongest party in all of them. In the ten western states, where the Left Party is primarily a welfare state and protest party, it averaged 8.3% of the vote. There, its voters come mainly from the lower social strata, and are usually men of middle age with intermediate or low formal educational qualifications. In the East, the Left Party is a “party for all—nobody should be excluded,” both

5 Jörg Prella (2009). Hessische Aspekte der Bundestagswahl 2009 (Hessian aspects of the Bundestag election), [www.rosalux.de/themen/parteien-demokratie/publikationen/publikation/datum/2010/01/24/der-blick-in-die-laender-1/thema/sprachen/parteien-demokratie/priorisierung-regional.html](http://www.rosalux.de/themen/parteien-demokratie/publikationen/publikation/datum/2010/01/24/der-blick-in-die-laender-1/thema/sprachen/parteien-demokratie/priorisierung-regional.html).

**Table 1: Election Results of the Left Party  
By Occupation, Education and Age**

	TOTAL	WEST	EAST
<b>LEFT PARTY VOTERS</b>	11.9%	8.3%	26.4%
<b>OCCUPATION</b>			
Blue-Collar Workers	17	12	31
White-Collar Workers	12	8	29
Civil Servants	8	6	26
Self-Employed	8	6	21
<b>EDUCATION</b>			
Middle School	12	9	28
O-Level Certificate	14	9	30
A-Level Certificate	1	6	28
<b>AGE</b>			
Under 30		10	23
30 – 44		9	26
45 – 59		10	33

in terms of its electoral support and the formulation of its political positions. Even if here too its voters come from the lower social strata, they are also to be found among white-collar workers, civil servants, farmers, critical intellectuals, apprentices and especially pensioners. In the East, Left Party voters include just as many women as men, and show a more balanced picture with regard to formal educational qualifications.

The differences between East and West in voter attitudes toward the party have given rise to different perspectives on the party even amongst its own leadership: Regional leaders in the West see it as a protest party; those in the East, as a mass party. On one side, the view prevails that the concept of a mass party dilutes its focus on the socially disadvantaged, is ill-defined, and contradicts the party's self-image as a class party of the working people and the unemployed. The contrary view is that the approach of being a protest party of the socially disadvantaged excludes important voter groups in the middle of society from the Left Party, nailing the party to its oppositional role, and thus abandoning any chance for parliamentary policy formulation as a governing party. Yet this is exactly what the

voters of the Left Party in the eastern states expect, as is expressed in election results of over 20%. The Left Party was in coalition governments in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, and in Berlin for ten years prior to 2011; it is currently in the government of Brandenburg, in all cases together with the SPD. In the East, and also in the Saarland, it wins 20% or more, and is seen as “the party that cares.” In the West, it is still not in all state parliaments, has no prospect for entering state governments, and less than 23% of its council seats have been won in these states.

After the 2009 Bundestag election, the position of the Left Party in the party system changed, for with the formation of a conservative-liberal coalition, it now shares its opposition role with the Social Democrats and the Greens. The arithmetical majority for the three left-of-centre parties, which had existed in 2005, was lost<sup>6</sup>—due not so much to the strength of the centre-right parties as to the collapse of the SPD, which saw its support drop to half its 1998 level—23%, its worst showing since 1890.<sup>7</sup> It lost 1.49 million voters to the Left and Green Parties, and only 1.05 million to the CDU and FDP, while 1.6 million SPD voters stayed home. It lost voters in all age groups, but particularly among the young: minus 20%, and even more, 21%, among young women. It also suffered above average losses in its traditional constituencies: blue- and white-collar workers and trade unionists. Although the SPD has recovered somewhat in both the polls and in state elections, it seems to be stuck at the 30% level nationwide, with both the Left Party and the Greens having been strengthened in the long term, partially at its expense. In any case, the Left Party can no longer define itself with reference to the weakness of the SPD.

If, however, there are going to be social and political majorities for a political change of course, the Left Party must define its relationship to

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kahrs (2009), op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside the elections just prior to and after the Nazi seizure of power.

the SPD more clearly. At present, the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens act in opposition independently of one another, with no joint political or social project discernible. The relationship of the Left Party to the Social Democrats is unclear. Gesine Löttsch, one of the two co-chairs of the Left Party from 2010–2012, saw the SPD not as an enemy, but rather as a party with which she could imagine cooperating.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, her colleague Klaus Ernst declared that while the SPD's partial backing off from the "Hartz IV" labor market reform programme since the Bundestag elections is indeed a first step, it is still not enough. For them to be capable of governing, he believes, and to receive the support of the Left Party for that purpose, they would have to undergo a change of personnel, and take such other steps as support for a tax on wealth and, in peace policy, the withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan.

In the Left Party's new Programme, published in October 2011, the only references to the Social Democrats are historical, for the Left Party sees the SPD's founding concepts as part of its own historical heritage; the Greens, on the other hand, are referred to largely by criticisms of the red-green government of 1998–2005. The Programme's Preamble states somewhat vaguely that the Left Party differs from all those parties that "obsequiously submit to the wishes of the economically powerful and for that very reason can scarcely be told apart."<sup>9</sup>

The Left Party sees itself "in fundamental social and political opposition to neoliberalism and the rule of capital, imperialist policy and war."<sup>10</sup> It describes as one of its core tasks a change in the balance of the societal relationship of power in order to implement a "restructuring of society based on solidarity and a left democratic, social, ecological and peaceful policy"<sup>11</sup>—all this through a transformation of the relationships of power and property. This would include a democratic economic order,

*that subjects the market regulation of production and distribution to democratic, social and ecological framing and control. It has to be based on public and democratically controlled ownership in services of general interest, of the social infrastructure, in the power industry and in the financial sector. We want the democratic socialization of further structurally relevant areas on the basis of state, municipal, co-operative or workforce ownership.<sup>12</sup>*

In order to be able to realize this, a broad societal left alliance would be needed. The political alliances necessary for this should only be entered into if they advance a political change of direction in government and society, and if the core demands of the Left Party, such as the withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan, the repeal of the neoliberal labor market Hartz IV laws, the introduction of a legal minimum wage, and the abandonment of the plan to raise the retirement age to 67, are agreed to and seriously implemented.

## The Left Party After the Elections of 2011

The Berlin election of September 2011 was the last in that year's cycle of seven state and two

state-wide municipal elections. The Left Party had been able to assert itself as a political force for social justice. However, in all these elections it dropped significantly behind its results in the

8 Gesine Löttsch: Die SPD ist nicht mein Feind (The SPD is not my enemy), [www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article6292554/Gesine-Loetzsch-Die-SPD-ist-nicht-mein-Feind.html](http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article6292554/Gesine-Loetzsch-Die-SPD-ist-nicht-mein-Feind.html).

9 Programme DIE LINKE, p. 4 (Preamble).

10 Ibid., p. 74.

11 Ibid., p. 75.

12 Ibid., p. 5 (Preamble).

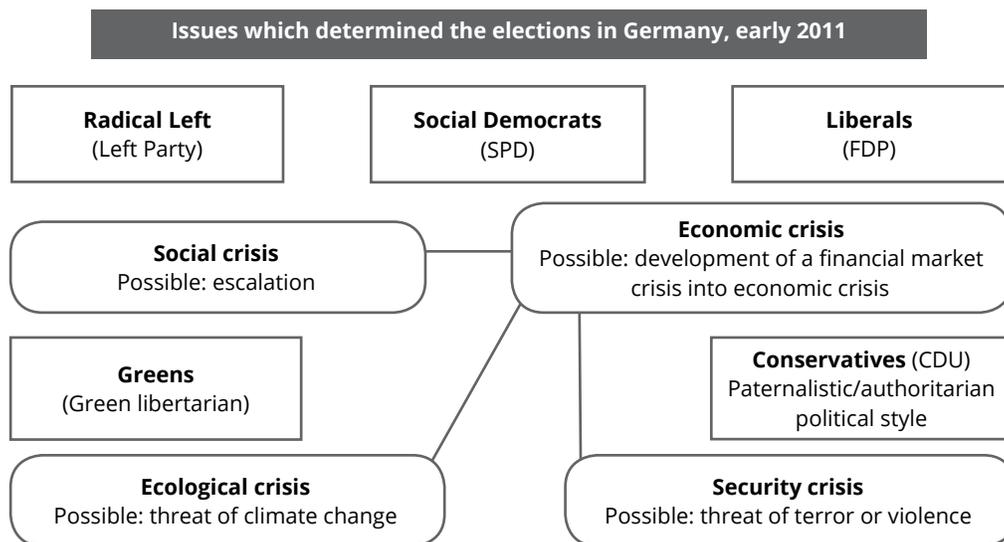
Bundestag elections of 2009, in which it had won 11.9 percent nationwide.

Although the bourgeois camp has no uniform strategy for the current economic and financial crisis, the Left Party has not succeeded in becoming part of an alternative social and political alliance. On the contrary, the SPD-Green option not including the Left Party is being discussed as a feasible political alternative. The increasing social acceptability of the Greens in 2011 made possible Germany's first Green state premier, in Baden-Württemberg, the large, prosperous state in the Southwest. Given real developments towards a restoration of neoliberalism by authoritarian means, and the thorough-going neoliberal integration of the European Union, their idea of a "Green New Deal" seems the only politically acceptable alternative capable of winning support from major segments of society. This development towards a green capitalism found its first politically visible expression in the nuclear phase-out declared by the Federal Government in March 2011, in the wake of the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, Japan. As a result, energy and the climate became the decisive issues in

such elections as those for the state parliaments of Baden-Württemberg and neighbouring Rhineland-Palatinate, where the Greens also entered government as the SPD's junior partners. In both states, the Left Party failed to win seats.

Thus the changed constellations of social conflict have also altered the perception of and emphases on the financial and economic crisis, of the environmental and energy crisis as well as of the alleged crisis of security (terrorism, migration waves, etc.). By introducing short-time work regulations, economic stimulus packages and the "cash-for-clunkers" bonus, the economic slump was in fact staved off in 2009 for the majority of the people by means of structurally conservative measures. The conditions were preserved to quickly re-expand production and reduce unemployment, as soon as demand reignited. In this context, the social question lost importance, particularly in Stuttgart, the corporate headquarters and main production site of Mercedes-Benz—and the capital of Baden-Württemberg. The CDU developed a conservative, export-oriented economic strategy, combined with an increased anti-terror and authoritarian

**Figure 1: Conflicts which decided the elections, Spring 2011**



security policy. The Greens countered with their “Green New Deal,” designed to combine economic policy with a turn in energy policy, and also emphasized increased social inclusion and democratization. The demands of the Left Party for a socially just distribution of the burdens of the crisis thus failed to register with the public.

In Baden-Württemberg, this constellation led to the defeat of the CDU-FDP state government by Germany’s first “green-red” coalition—a Green state premier ruling with SPD support, instead of the other way round. The Left Party hardly played any role in the public debate dominated not only by a focus on energy and climate issues, but also by a contrast in political style: authoritarian vs. libertarian.

In the Bremen state election in May, the energy/ecological issue was still important, but no longer decisive; the social question had again moved to the top of the political agenda. Nonetheless, the Left Party again fell short of its results achieved both in the previous state election in 2007 and in the 2009 Bundestag election. The same was true in the ensuing elections held in September 2011 in the eastern states of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Berlin. The Left Party could assert itself as a party demanding social justice, but was confronted—in particular in Berlin,

where it was a party in government—with increasing processes of fragmentation as a result of neoliberal measures imposed at the federal and European levels which it had to implement locally. Its own successful social projects, especially in the areas of labor market and social policy, were seen by voters as less important.

Still, at the beginning of the year 2012, the Left Party remains credible as a party of social justice and a party that is in a special way able to secure the loyalties of workers and unemployed people. It achieves above average results among voters between 45 and 59 years of age, and in eastern Germany appeals to voters over 60. However, its attractiveness to younger voters is below average, and it is increasingly losing strength in the age group between 34 and 45, the generation whose social and political experience is dominated by the development of post-Fordist working and living conditions, and by new communications and information technologies.

Thus, the results in the election cycle of 2010 and 2011 reflect the social impact of the Left Party, the current practical value the public attributes to it, the attractiveness of its political proposals and finally also of its leadership. What became visible was the party’s strength as

**Table 2: Social structure of members and voters of the Left Party**

	MEMBERS 2009 (%)	BUNDESTAG ELECTIONS 2009 (%)	SAXONY- ANHALT (EAST) 2011 (%)	BADEN- WÜRTTEMBERG (WEST) 2011 (%)	BERLIN (FORMERLY SPLIT) 2011 (%)
<b>VOTERS OF THE LEFT PARTY</b>		11.9	23.7	2.8	11.7
Blue-collar workers	18	11	25	5	14
White-collar workers	32	5	22	3	10
Self-employed	12	4	15	1	11
Pensioners	53	4	26	2	15
Students	4	6	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Unemployed	8	15	35	12	16

Please note that figures do not add up to 100 percent.

a partner for issues of social justice, its deficits in the development of its programme, strategy and organization, and most of all, its lack of social rooting beyond representation in state parliament and municipalities in the biggest states. Therefore the Left Party must use its increased presence in such states as Lower Saxony in the Northwest, where it holds a large number of seats and hence has access to more resources, as a “motor” for rooting itself in society, albeit with the knowledge that parliamentary presence is no surrogate for the development of local grassroots organizations.

Currently, the Left Party is still a party whose results in current opinion polls remain below the 5% threshold in five out of ten western states, and exceed the 20% mark in only three eastern states. The Left Party is also losing support in its former urban strongholds, including Berlin. In 2011, the party failed to meet its own goal of continuing or establishing new “red-red” coalition projects with the SPD: It lost ground in Berlin, so that the ten-year-old government

there has ended, and in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania fell back to third place behind the Conservatives, who are now the junior partners of the SPD there. The Left Party now lacks the societal tailwind which between 2007 and 2009 helped it to establish itself as a successful political force in then 13 states and at the national level. Its new social concept proclaimed in 2009 for a model of the social welfare state of the 21st century linking the social and ecological questions is lacking in drive, as there is no attractive counter-plan leading towards a social and ecological transformation. Until now, the Left Party has been the one that “tells it like it is,” that has asked the right questions, but it has failed to demonstrate its competence with regard to solutions for the future. And it has found that it has no monopoly on the privilege of raising issues or questioning the prevailing conditions. In Berlin at the state level, this role has recently been assumed by a completely new political force, the Pirate Party, whose members also see themselves as—at least to a certain degree—on the left.

## Membership and Social Composition of the Left Party

In 2010, the Left Party had about 78,400 members. Some 37% of them were women; their proportion in the eastern state parties was between 44 and 46%; in the western state parties, it averaged 24%. The same was true for the party’s new members.<sup>13</sup> Only very vague statements can be made regarding their social structure, due to a lack of data; these are based on publications about the Left Party,<sup>14</sup> statements

by party functionaries and on databases and reports of the Credential Verification Commissions at Party Congresses. The membership of the Party closely corresponds with its respective regional voter support; i.e. most members in the western states tend to belong to disadvantaged groups, including a considerable portion of unemployed. The membership in the eastern states still has a disproportionate number of pensioners, although that is not true of the active membership. This is exemplified by the delegates to Party Congresses, over 90% of whom are active in base organizations or had functions in the district or state party structure.<sup>15</sup> In

13 Data on membership trends from the Executive Committee of the Left Party, May 2010.

14 Cf. Sören Messinger/Jonas Rugenstein: Der Erfolg der Partei DIE LINKE. Sammlung im programmatischen Nebel (The success of the Left Party. Coming together in a programmatic fog), in: Felix Butzlaff/Stine Harm/Franz Walter (eds.): Patt oder Gezeitenwechsel? Deutschland 2009 (Stalemate or sea-change? Germany 2009), Wiesbaden 2009.

15 A comparison of delegate verification reports from the Party Congresses in 2004, 2006 and 2010 shows that

2010, the proportion of blue and white-collar workers among them was 33.8% (2008: 32.6); of self-employed 19.5% (2008: 17.3); of students 2.8% (2008: 3.4); of school pupils 0.7% (2008: 2.0); of unemployed 2.3% (2008: 3.4); and of pensioners 6.0% (2008: 5.2).<sup>16</sup> If we compare this data with those of the delegate profiles of the mostly East German PDS in 1999, 2002 and 2004, we find that the proportion of blue and white-collar workers dropped from 60% in 1999 to 41% in 2006; since 2007, they have made up about a third of the delegates. The proportion of self-employed is relatively constant at about 20%. The proportion of unemployed among the delegates to party congresses has fallen. In 1999 it was 6.9% and since 2007 it has vacillated between 2 and 3%. Since 2008, pensioners have accounted for about 5% of delegates.

Among new members, the ratio of employed to unemployed persons underwent a shift between 2004 and 2007. While in 2004, 48% were employed and 52% unemployed, by 2007 the proportion of employed was 56% and the proportion of unemployed 44%. The motives of the new members for joining the party are mainly connected with issues of social justice. These include the growth of social inequality, jobs providing a living wage, welfare benefits and pensions that permit lives in dignity, and equal rights for all. Of lesser importance are peace, ecological and educational issues.<sup>17</sup>

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the proportion of delegates active in local base organizations increased slightly from 22% in 2006 to almost 26% in 2010. The share of delegates in district and state functions remained more or less constant, at 45%. The problem of dual functions—those holding both a party and an electoral office—is shown in the reports: the sum of all data since 2006 always yields totals in excess of 100%. The proportion of delegates who are members of a union rose from 44% in 2006 to almost 60% in 2010.

16 DIE LINKE (2010): Bericht der Mandatsprüfungskommission an den 2. Parteitag vom 15./16. Mai in Rostock. (Report of the Second Party Congress Delegate Verification Commission).

17 Kajo Tetzlaff/Alexander Reetz (2009): Statistische Untersuchung der Parteieintritte DIE LINKE 2004/2007 (Mai-August), (Statistical investigation of new members of the Left Party, 2004/2007).

A close correlation between members and electoral supporters is to be found in the age structure. The Left Party has its greatest voter potential in the 46-60 age group—and some 50% of the members of the western state organizations are aged between 41 and 60, about 25% are 35 or under, and over 3% are over 70. That is different in the eastern state organizations, where the proportion of members 35 or under makes up only 7%, while about 24% are aged between 41 and 60, and over 50% are over 70. However, the age structure of the active membership, as shown, for example, by the social composition of delegates to Party Congresses, is very different.

First, this age structure remained more or less constant between 1999 and 2010. The proportion of delegates aged 25 or less remained between 6 and 7%, and of those aged between 25 and 45, between 13 and 17%. About 30% of the delegates were between 45 and 55. The share of those between 55 and 65 rose slightly, from 18 in 2006 to 23% in 2010. Since 1999, the share of those aged over 65 has stayed between 5 and 7%.

As the proportion of West German members has grown, the Left Party has been changing its language and shedding its image as an eastern party. In 2006, almost 80% of its members came from the eastern states, but by 2009 this figure had dropped to 63%. Since 2006, the eastern state parties have lost a total of about 5,000 members, while the western state parties managed to recruit 13,000 new members. The East-West weighting in the party's structure was established in the cooperation agreements reached during the merger process of the two original parties, the East German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice (WASG), mostly composed of West German former SPD members. Under this agreement, which also applied to the formula for the selection of delegates to Party Congresses, each former party was to be equally represented in all bodies. Thus, the

average delegate from an eastern state represented about three times as many members as one from a western state.

Various contradictory or mutually exclusive expectations are made of the party, including the provision of assistance for people's lives. For many, the party is a place for jointly seeking justice and/or social alternatives, while for others it is a sanctuary for a shared history, or for exchanging views and engaging in social activities. Yet others see in it a career opportunity, a chance to wield power and influence, or to find solutions to private problems. Not everyone

wants to be active; some are content to pay their dues, while others have not yet found the right circumstances for becoming active. It is not clear whether the Left Party wants to organize itself at the grass-roots level with the participation of many local and citizens' initiatives and plenty of scope for local self-organization, or whether it wants to concentrate on building competence centres, so as to expand its competencies and its parliamentary base. Both will be necessary, and will have to be the goals of the ongoing work of building the party—taking into account both concrete requirements and the party's overall responsibilities.

## The Question of Organization and Intra-Party Democracy

The Left Party has its roots in the history of the international labor movement and the peace movement, and it is committed to anti-fascism. It is close to the trade unions, the social movements and draws strength from feminism and the ecological movement. It sees itself as pluralist and open "for everyone who wants to achieve the same goals by democratic means".<sup>18</sup> The party is divided into state organizations, with each member belonging to a district organization, usually in his/her place of residence. The Left Party grants members extensive rights, including the right to form associations with others within the party, and the right to propose motions in all organs of the party; individual members can even propose motions at the National Party Congress. The opportunity to take part in party work may be extended to guest members, on whom nearly all membership rights may be conferred, with the exception of the right to take part in membership ballots, vote on statute-related issues, stand for election to executive bodies, and vote to nominate candidates for parliamentary

and municipal bodies. Members are free to form intra-party associations, which are recognized at the national level if they have been recognized as statewide associations by at least eight state parties. These associations operate independently, receive party funding, and are allowed to elect delegates to party congresses. At present there are 22 associations at the national level, including political tendencies such as the Socialist Left, the Forum for Democratic Socialism and the Anticapitalist Left, as well as working/interest associations which focus on specific issues. Examples are the Ecological Platform, the Workplace and Trade Union Working Group, and the Peace and Security Policy Working Group.

Membership ballots may be held on all political issues. They may be called upon application by state or district organizations representing at least a quarter of the membership. The applications may be submitted by eight state organizations, 5,000 party members, or by a resolution of the party congress or the National Committee. Both non-discriminatory equality<sup>19</sup> and gender

<sup>18</sup> DIE LINKE (2007): Bundessatzung der Partei DIE LINKE. 1. Auftrag und Name der Partei (National Statute of the Left Party, 1. Party goal and name), p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Non-discriminatory equality is specified in the the ex-

democracy are enshrined in the National Statutes. Half of all office holders in party bodies must be women. Of the members of the na-

tional or state party executive committees, the holders of seats in European, federal or state parliaments must be less than half of the total.

## The Development of the Party

The parity in the leading bodies of the party and the high degree of autonomy of the state organizations have not only shaped the merger process, but have remained to this day the way in which political and socio-cultural heterogeneity in the party are maintained. The leadership of the National Executive that was elected at the National Party Congress in 2010 in Rostock was, with the exception of the treasurer, based on a duality of East-West, PDS-WASG parity. This applies to the chair, the deputy chairs, the party manager and those in charge of party development. This settlement of the leadership question with the involvement of the regional chairs was seen as a solution to the outbreak of tensions at the beginning of 2010, after the resignations of the co-chairs Oskar Lafontaine (ex-WASG) and Lothar Bisky (ex-PDS) had created a power vacuum. At stake was the interpretation and orientation of the party, its role

in the party system, its function and its practical value. Inside the party, which is still a project of two mutually dependent sub-parties, these issues are still a subject of controversy, aggravated by different ideas regarding party politics, political biographies, socializations and divergent political cultures. The election of the new leadership brought this to the surface. The necessary extension of transitional regulations had to be confirmed by an amendment to the statutes of the party congress. In order to ensure the necessary majority for this at the party congress—a two-thirds majority is required to amend the statutes—the party congress held a membership ballot, in which about 48% of the members took part, of whom over 80% gave their assent, while 94% declared themselves in favor of putting the new Party Programme to the vote in another membership ballot by the end of 2011 in which it was approved.

## The Basic Conditions for the Merger Process

The PDS was, of course, the party that emerged from the SED, the communist ruling party of

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executive bodies of the party and the territorial organizations. (Statute, Paragraph 9, where prevention of any kind of discrimination is stated as a basic principle of the party). Section 2 states: "The rights of social, ethnic and cultural minorities in the membership, especially the right to self-determination, enjoy the special protection of the national and territorial executive committees. Their representation and involvement in the decision-making process of the party shall be supported." *Ibid*, p. 10.

East Germany. It is the only such party to have transformed itself into a radical, left-democratic party; the others either moved into the social-democratic camp, or, in a few cases, remained true to the authoritarian "Marxist-Leninist" tradition. After its defeat in the 2002 elections, the PDS had only two representatives in the Bundestag.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The PDS got less than 5% of the vote nationwide, and would thus normally have got no seats at all. However,

The WASG emerged in 2004 as an association of mostly West German SPD and trade union activists disillusioned with the course of the SPD-led government; it was founded as a party in January 2005. Many of its members were long-time leftist radicals; in British terms, they were “entrists” within the SPD.

In the May 2005 elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s biggest state, the WASG and the PDS failed to clear the 5% hurdle needed for seats in Germany, gaining 2.2% and less than 1%, respectively. The project of creating a successful party with both societal and parliamentary influence as an alternative to the neoliberal policies of the SPD, and with a view of achieving a more solidarity-based society, was clearly beyond the power of the WASG on its own. Its resources were relatively meagre, while its influence in the eastern states, with the exception of Berlin, was still marginal. Although the PDS had been able to recover from its defeat of 2002 and stabilize its position in the European elections of 2004, it too faced uncertain prospects, as its potential for internal organizational and political renewal had been largely exhausted. Its attempt to establish itself in the West was making hardly any progress.

The erosion of SPD support, while not resulting in any seats for the WASG, did cause the fall of this traditional SPD stronghold to the CDU-FDP alliance, and, indirectly, the fall of the red-green federal government that summer. With the early Bundestag elections, the two left parties were now “condemned” to cooperate—to agree on procedures enabling a joint ticket in the elections. Their common focus was on their rejection of the government’s Agenda 2010, which was seen as the core of the neoliberal project of social and democratic cutbacks. Their entry into the Bundestag, and the refusal of the SPD to cooperate with them, led to the formation

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two candidates won single-member seats in East Berlin. Had there been three such winners, the party would have qualified for an exemption from the 5% rule.

of Angela Merkel’s first government, a CDU-SPD coalition. In 2006, the PDS and the WASG merged to form the party DIE LINKE—“The Left”. The necessary organizational issues involved in building the new party, in particular the strategic decisions concerning a new Programme, were postponed until after the election campaigns of 2008 and 2009. The questions to be clarified remained unresolved, which encouraged the divergent political group, which was only being kept together by the top leadership, to organize within a party. These groupings drew in part on the concerns of their original parties, whose internal conflicts they reflected, causing the differences between the old parties to be carried over into the new project. Under the umbrella of the united Left Party, they provided scope for various discourses, projects and concrete activities. On the one hand, they could be brought together in the election campaigns for joint actions, such as those against Hartz IV, for a minimum wage, for the defence of democratic rights and liberties, for a policy of peace, or for cooperation with social movements in such instances as opposition to the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm in 2007. On the other, they facilitated the coexistence of divergent political and organizational perspectives, diverse political styles, a multitude of political cultures, and cultural codes which had emerged in the course of concrete political experience and theoretical discourses. Specifically, this meant the coexistence of authoritarian, welfare-state-oriented, communist, Trotskyite, left-wing socialist and reformist-libertarian groupings. They alternatively describe their party as anti-capitalist or critical of capitalism; as a party opposed to capitalism, neoliberalism or a neoliberal-oriented social democracy; as a party defending the welfare state; or as a party that is critical of the system and wishes to draw on the emancipatory potential of bourgeois society.

Since 2006, these groupings have developed into formal tendencies with their own statutes, founding documents, websites, events, conferences and summer schools, which has caused

their view of themselves to change. They have become organized actors exerting power and influence on the development of the party and its political orientation. They have been concerned with securing and expanding their own political weight within the party, with putting their own candidates into office and, ultimately, with forcing through their own political line. Different positions on matters of substance have confronted each other. At its EU Party Congress in 2009, the Left Party presented itself culturally as an alliance of divergent tendencies. However, at the Berlin Party Congress held that same year in preparation for the Bundestag elections, things were very different. Now, under the pressure of the election campaigns, the Left Party succeeded in pulling itself together and presenting itself as the party of social justice, backing this up with the four main demands mentioned above.

Today, the Left Party cultivates the image of a consistent force for social justice and peace. Since the 2009 election, it has given this image concrete form in its ten-point Immediate Programme, which, however, falls short of its stated claim to call the system into question. To do so, it would have to link its current demands to its “new social idea.” There is agreement on the rejection of neoliberalism, but not in the assessment of capitalism. The critique of capitalism and the possibilities of developing social alternatives to it are defined variously or controversially. The differences produce divergent self-images and expectations of the party and its strategic partners, and on the effectiveness of political strategies, programmes and projects. They are reflected in the documents of the various political tendencies in the party: anti-capitalist or critical of capitalism, radical and/or reformist.

## **What Are the Differences Between the Various Left Positions?**

We will attempt here to illustrate them by way of the examples of four central and at the same time contentious left-wing issues: the analysis of capitalism; the description of social fault lines; the property question; and the question of left-wing participation in government. All are at present the subject of controversy, especially in connection with the programmatic debates.<sup>21</sup>

### **1. The analysis of capitalism and social perspectives**

Although the question regarding capitalism's capacity to develop and innovate may appear simple, there are indeed very divergent positions within the Left Party in this respect. Is

this capacity simply a result of the exploitation of people and nature, and of the oppression of nations, or does it, by virtue of developing new modes of production, new technologies and new products, also give rise to a new quality of modes of production and living that point the way forward beyond capitalism? Are its achievements—such as the welfare state—therefore departures from the norm of capitalism, or are they an intrinsic, constitutive element of the capitalist system not focused exclusively upon profit, which is itself constantly fought over, and represents a field of social conflict? Must the Left Party aim at a complete break, or should it concentrate its strategy and programmes on pushing back the dominant role of profit in capitalism?

For those supporting a strict anti-capitalist position, the destructive potential of “casino” or

<sup>21</sup> The positions presented here are to be found in the programmatic documents of the relevant tendencies.

“predatory” capitalism and its inability to respond to the challenges of the current crises are central to the analysis. In their view, the capacity to reform only serves the purpose of adaptation to changing existential conditions, or is the result of class struggles. They emphasize the crisis-prone development of flexible, financial-market-driven capitalism. Those supporting a more reform-oriented position tend to describe the contradiction between capitalism’s productive possibilities and the concrete reality of social conditions. Others in turn assume that despite the prevailing dominance of capital, at the heart of which lies profit maximization, realms may emerge which are not subject to the logic of profit, and could hence promote alternative developments, under changed hegemonic conditions. Consequently, the latter support the concept of a transformational process which can only be realized in practice by a dialectic interweaving of reformist and revolutionary changes.

Interpretations of socialism as a social alternative also differ. For some, it is still the goal, the path and the set of values, as described in the PDS Party Programme of 2003, in which socialism is seen as a society in which each and every individual has equal access to the basic goods of a free life in solidarity. While the goal is primary, the specific means must be decided on democratically. Freedom is the point of reference of socialist policies, and equality the measure of participation in the benefits of freedom, which permit all members of society equal access to the elementary basic conditions of a self-determined life worthy of human beings. These include social and legal security, health, work, education, culture, clean air, clean water, and much more.<sup>22</sup> On the level of concrete parliamentary politics, especially at the state level, the dialectical link between goals and practice, between day-to-day politics and social alternatives, has so far been lacking, although parlia-

mentary representatives repeatedly refer to the “strategic triangle” of the Left Party:

- ⇒ First, drafting an alternative vision of social development (democratic socialism);
- ⇒ Second, resistance to social cutbacks, restriction of democracy, environmental pollution and war;
- ⇒ Third, the political shaping of society inside and outside the parliaments.

The art of left political strategy is to combine all this with the development of projects that create the conditions for an alternative path of social development, and to win social majorities for them.

## **2. The property question**

The Left Party differs from the other parties in that it poses the systemic question in terms of the relations of ownership and production. The rule of capitalist private property must be overcome by genuine socialization. The abolition of the capitalist system of property means the transfer to public ownership of all important corporations in the key sectors, i.e. of all structurally vital enterprises. There is agreement in the Left Party that this refers to the areas of key public utilities, infrastructure, the energy grids, information networks, and the financial system. There are differences of opinion with regard to the expansion of public ownership. Should all corporations be nationalized, for example? Or do we also need a societally relevant private-enterprise sector organized on a decentralized basis, which would allow the existence of competing, efficiently producing economic units acting on their own responsibility and producing on their “own account”? Does the socialist system of property mean the transfer of all important means of production to public ownership, or does it mean a multi-sector

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22 Cf. PDS Party Programme of 2003.

economy with a strong public sector under democratic control?

### 3. The question of interests and the key lines of conflict in society

Whose interests should the Left Party represent? Should it represent the interests of the working people and the unemployed—i.e. should it be the representative of specific interests—or does it see itself as the representative of the overall interests of the majority of the people? What is clear is that left-wing

hegemony can only be realized by articulating and bringing together various interests. It is also clear that it will be necessary to reconcile contradictory interests that face one another across lines of societal conflict, such as that between wage-earners and the unemployed, and especially the conflict between capital and labor. The predominance of this conflict, from which others—such as those between the genders and between humankind and its natural environment—are derived, tends to be stressed by those with anti-capitalist views. The key task of the Left Party is therefore seen as being the societal organization and the just

**Table 3: Comparison of divergent positions within the Left Party**

Position A	Subject	Position B
Society is capitalist, i.e. all its areas are capitalist; changes arise out of adjustment processes intrinsic to the system, or are the result of class struggles, which alleviate certain evils for a time.	<b>View of the world as it is</b>	Capitalist society develops as a struggle between two tendencies: a dominant logic of capital and a social logic that develops as a result of social and democratic struggles; capital-dominated society has emancipation potentials the left must tap.
The crisis of over-accumulation leads to constantly intensifying competition between the major capitalist countries. A radical redistribution of national income is forced through at the expense of those dependent on employment, while cuts in and privatization of social systems and utilities take place.	<b>Interpretation of crises</b>	The crisis of financial-market capitalism is tied to a comprehensive crisis of civilization, in which financial-market, economic, climatic and food crises coincide. Various scenarios are possible: authoritarian capitalism with democracy and welfare cuts, a Green New Deal, a socio-ecological transformation.
Capitalism has entered a new expansive and aggressive phase.	<b>Current balance of forces</b>	An organic crisis of neo-liberal financial-market capitalism has occurred.
Primacy of the contradiction between capital and labour, from which other contradictions are derived.	<b>Main fault lines</b>	Plurality of conflicts – capital-labour, racism, sexism, the North-South conflict.
Transformation of society is rejected as illusory, all that is needed being resistance to the ruling bloc, against mass unemployment, and the struggle to preserve and expand the welfare state.	<b>Social perspectives</b>	Socialism as medium-term, essential orientation for the left democratic socialism as a transformational process; a society based on solidarity.
A social order in which private ownership of the means of production is superseded by real socialization.	<b>View of socialism</b>	Goals, path and values as in the PDS Party Programme of 2003.
Economic democracy, especially democratic regulation of financial markets Alternative economic policy with strengthening of domestic demand.	<b>Ways and means</b>	Socio-ecological transformation, strengthening of public control and comprehensive democratization of the economy and society.

All forms of ownership of the means of production to be brought under public control, with co-determination by employees; transfer of key areas of the economy, including utilities, to public ownership.	<b>Property question</b>	Pluralist, solidarity-based property order; participation of various forces in the disposal (workforces, representatives of regions, ecological interests), without abolishing entrepreneurial independence in the process.
Wage-earners (whether employed, unemployed, or drawing pensions) Interests of those who own nothing or little in capitalist society	<b>Whose interests should be mainly represented (target groups)?</b>	Centre-left alliance, view of Left Party in East as mass party, i.e. policies for all, building of political centre-left alliances
Improvement of people's concrete circumstances participation in government is to be linked to conditions: no welfare cuts, no privatization of public utilities, no cuts in the public services; at the national level, withdrawal of Bundeswehr from Afghanistan.	<b>Participation in government</b>	Improvement of people's concrete circumstances Participation in government serves to shape policy for forcing through transformational projects; ways of changing internal and external balances of power: A strategic triangle – combination of protest, resistance and alternative projects.
No Bundeswehr missions abroad (with or without a UN mandate).	<b>Peace policy</b>	Rejection of combat missions not mandated by the UN.
Key demand: equal pay for equal work, equal access to paid employment and hence the key significance of the reconcilability of family and career. Historically, women's movements have their political roots on the left.	<b>Gender relations</b>	Gender relations are not a secondary contradiction, but just as important as other social contradictions; dissolution of traditional gender roles; gender justice, too, with regard to paid employment; reconcilability of family and career.
No privatization of public property, seen as "internal enclosure", instead social, state and municipal responsibility for education, health, water and energy; expansion of the public services.	<b>Differences in key demands</b>	No privatization of public utilities; exploring public forms of ownership: the public character alone is not enough; restructuring of the public services.
Access to and a fairer distribution of jobs, a minimum wage, jobs that pay a living wage; shorter working hours without loss of pay.	<b>Work</b>	Access to work in dignity from which one can live, but also addressing alienated paid employment under capitalist conditions; no compulsory employment.
Primacy of collective values like solidarity both in everyday life and everyday consciousness; individual values secondary. <i>Freedom through socialism.</i>	<b>Values</b>	Freedom, equality, solidarity, emancipation, justice, preservation of nature; emphasis on individual freedom. <i>Socialism through freedom.</i>

distribution of paid jobs and other socially necessary types of work. Gender equality means equal access to jobs, equal pay, and the reconcilability of family and career. In this sense, Left Party policy must be class-oriented. Different positions are represented in the party by those who make the claim to being emancipatory, and therefore also see the value of freedom as including freedom from alienated labor under capitalism. Consequently, they demand the right to an unconditional basic income. This

approach emphasizes the plurality of various forms of exploitation and oppression, against which a plurality of solidarity-based emancipatory struggles will have to be developed, all with equal status and all equally important for the Left Party. Only in this way will it be possible to create an alternative centre-left alliance, to which emancipatory, solidarity-minded groups of the social and cultural centre belong, such as threatened middle strata, core groups of the wage-earning population, the unemployed or

the precariously employed, the marginalized, and migrants and refugees.

However the goals of social change and concrete demands are formulated, the claims they contain—such as to be “realistic and radical, and get to the root of things,” the claim to be a force for political protest and resistance in the German party system, or to be a creative left-wing force that links parliamentary politics with socialist perspectives so as to create the prerequisites for an alternative course of development—have so far only been met rudimentarily by the Left Party as a whole, whether in conceptual or in practical terms. There is no coherent concept for a socio-ecological transformation of the whole of society on the basis of changed modes of production and living, individual self-determination and solidarity. At present, the agenda of the Left Party mainly amounts to the defence of social and democratic rights, which are being restricted by growing social inequality, the danger of a dismantling of democracy by referring decisions to the executive level—as in the bail-outs and stimulus packages at the national and state levels—and passing on the burdens of the crisis to the shoulders of the disadvantaged, especially the recipients of social transfer payments under the Hartz IV and other systems. The party acts as a societal force against the spreading precarity of labor and mass unemployment, and in defence of a well-functioning welfare state. It combines demands for the democratization of the economy with demands for expanded democratic co-determination for employees and trade-union co-determination, and for workforce ownership.

#### **4. The question of the Left Party's place in the party system, strategic partners, and Left Party participation in government**

For the newly founded Left Party the question of left-wing participation in government was a

contentious one right from the start. Indeed, the Berlin branch of the WASG initially refused to join, and ran its own ticket in the state's 2006 election, in opposition to the policy of the state government, in which the Left Party then participated. But this reflected neither an East-West conflict (although the Berlin WASG was largely a West Berlin group), nor a conflict between allegedly radical and reformist tendencies within the Left Party. No political tendency within the Left Party rejects participation in government, or the toleration of red-green governments in principle. Neither in Hesse in 2008, nor in the Saarland or Thuringia in 2009, nor in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2010, was a red-red-green coalition at the state level ruled out in principle; rather, it was the attitude of the SPD which prevented such an option.<sup>23</sup> This is also true of the national level. At issue are the conditions under which the Left Party would be prepared to join a government—as has always been the case, including in Berlin in 2006. There, the party formulated the essentials of left policy before entering the government: no university tuition, no privatization of public utilities, creation of a public employment sector (ÖBS) and comprehensive schools, and a state-supported programme against right-wing extremism.

There are various views in the Left Party as to whether and how “red lines”—marking the limits of compromise—should be drawn, and who should decide what they are. “We are prepared to take part if the social cutbacks in Germany are definitely stopped in the Bundesrat.”<sup>24</sup> In the programme of the Left Party<sup>25</sup> the conditions for left-wing governments were formulated as follows:

23 Except in the Saarland, where the Greens had the option between supporting an SPD-Left or a CDU-FDP government, and chose the latter; after the coalition collapsed in 2012, the situation was reversed: now the Greens were again open to “red-red-green”, the SPD not.

24 Oskar Lafontaine: Speech on the first day of the 2nd Party Congress of the Left Party on May 15, 2010 in Rostock. The Bundesrat, the upper house of the German Parliament, consists of representatives of the state governments, so that these can in fact influence national policy.

25 Party Programme, op. cit., here p. 76.

*DIE LINKE seeks participation in government when it will enable us to improve people's living conditions. [...] We will not participate in any government that wages war and authorizes Bundeswehr combat missions abroad, that promotes armament and militarization, that privatizes services of general interest or curtails social services, and whose policy worsens the way the Public Service performs its duties.*

These formulations were the outcome of a debate within the Party—mainly between those who see it as an extra-parliamentary force, and those who want to implement left-wing policies as a ruling party at the state level. However, disagreements on ruling out job cuts in the public services altogether remain. This is difficult, especially from the viewpoint of the eastern states, since it ignores the different circumstances prevailing in West and East, particularly the mass emigration from the eastern states, amounting to about 50,000 people a year, mostly by young women. The unemployment rate is still twice as high in the East as in the West, earnings in the East are only 70% of what they are in the West, and the unions are much weaker in the East. The poverty risk in Baden-Württemberg is 10%; in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, it is almost 30%. That demand also ignores the different relation of political forces in these states. Such western states as Baden-Württemberg are bastions of the unions—especially the mighty IG

Metall; there, the Left Party got 7.2% of the vote in the Bundestag election, as opposed to 32.4% in Saxony-Anhalt, an eastern state with weak unions. Thus the Left Party finds itself in a dilemma when it ties its aspirations for entering a coalition government to strong trade unions and strong extra-parliamentary social movements, especially in places like Saxony-Anhalt, where they don't exist. It may have emerged from the elections as the strongest party, but its organized social base is weak. Thus, the demand for a uniform nationwide approach is problematical.

Left-wing governments need both social and political acceptance. So far—especially after the collapse of the coalition negotiations in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2010—this has only happened in some eastern states. The beginning of 2010 saw the emergence of new crossover projects launched with enthusiasm by Leftists, Social Democrats, Greens, trade unionists and social movements. Although they quickly met with societal acceptance, their dynamism and political significance soon faded. Nevertheless the Left ought to hold on to those projects with a view to clarifying both their own and jointly held positions for developing a social alternative—something that leftists call socialism.

## **Related Texts**

### **From Revolution to Coalition (2010)**

Birgit Daiber, Cornelia Hildebrandt, and Anna Striethorst (Eds.)

### **The Left in Europe (2009)**

Cornelia Hildebrandt and Birgit Daiber (Eds.)

### **The Left Party in Germany: Origins, Aims, and Expectations (2005)**

Michael Brie (Ed.)