

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### A 'left' alternative in Germany?

*New Social Democratic Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine could mount a serious challenge to Chancellor Kohl.*

Almost two-thirds of the delegates at the national convention of the Social Democrats in Mannheim elected Oskar Lafontaine the new chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) on Nov. 16. The man he replaced, the weak 1994 chancellor candidate Rudolf Scharping, received a bit more than one-third of the vote—quite a humiliation.

The change was not unexpected. The opening sessions of the convention on Nov. 14 established how shallow the position of Scharping had become. The fights between the two main camps in the party organization, the stubbornly post-industrial camp of Scharping and the more pro-industrial Social Democrats around Gerhard Schroeder, broke out into the open. Following a barrage of attacks on his alleged lack of "solidarity" with the party and its current chairman, Schroeder exposed the fragility of Scharping's situation, declaring that he would "run as a candidate." For a moment, the entire rest of the party executive froze into icy grimaces, expecting Schroeder to announce for chairman against Scharping. But after a well-orchestrated pause, Schroeder said, ironically, "as a candidate for the party executive."

The leadership vacuum was wide open. Lafontaine, party vice chairman and head of its economic policy commission, announced his candidacy on Nov. 16 and received 62% of the convention votes.

Where will he lead the SPD? With the abrupt change of leadership, will there also be a new policy? As Lafontaine said after his election and reiterated in an interview in the Nov. 20

issue of the weekly *Der Spiegel*, he sees a potential for a "majority of the left camp," i.e., an open alliance of the SPD with the Green party and a less open alliance with the post-communist PDS, which is strong in Germany's eastern states. The "left majority" strategy counts on the collapse of the coalition government in Bonn under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, because of the feeble condition of Kohl's minor coalition partner, the Free Democrats, who have been voted out of 13 state parliaments in the last 30 months and are expected to be thrown out of the remaining three parliaments in the spring 1996 state elections.

The "left versus right" polarization strategy of Lafontaine may, however, convince Kohl to keep the coalition muddling through, to gain time to build up his own forces for the elections for national parliament in 1998. This would be the same constellation as in 1990, when Kohl campaigned for German unification against his SPD opponent Lafontaine, who opposed it. How good are Kohl's chances to repeat the success of 1990, when he delivered a smashing defeat to Lafontaine?

There is no doubt that Kohl is as skilled in demagogy as is Lafontaine, but the electorate has changed significantly since 1990. Meanwhile, the mishandling of the economic reconstruction challenge in the east has frustrated many former Kohl supporters, and the main political benefit from that goes to the PDS, the former communists, who in many election districts in the east have more voters than the Christian Democrats and SPD combined. A first meeting between

Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, the chairman of the PDS parliamentary group, will take place on Nov. 29, and more such meetings between senior officials of the SPD and the PDS are already scheduled to take place before the Christmas recess.

The common denominator of a "left-wing majority" will be a mixed bag of radical ecologism, such as a call for a basic energy tax on industrial production and private consumption, and for solar energy and other alternate sources to replace nuclear technology. These are cornerstones in the policy platforms of the SPD, the PDS, and the Greens.

Further, an SPD brand of fiscal austerity, which would reduce funding for the aerospace sector and cut labor costs in industry, for example, by cutting working hours without compensation, is the centerpiece of the Lafontaine "modern economic program" which received the party's blessing at the Mannheim convention.

But Lafontaine has not yet voiced clear positions on a number of critical problems of the economy, such as the staggering rise of the public debt, the need to control derivatives, and to combat monetary and commodity speculation. But it is there that an alternate economic policy to the promonetarist government of Kohl will have to be formulated, and it is there that voters who abandoned Lafontaine in 1990 and Scharping in 1994 in the SPD's election campaigns against Kohl, must be won over, in order to cement the "left majority." The majority view of the eastern electorate is, for example, that the pre-1990 "old debt," which Kohl insists be paid, is illegitimate, and should be annulled. All that is needed is for a senior politician outside of the PDS to take this issue up on a national level. If Lafontaine does that, Kohl knows that the threat to his chancellorship is serious.