

Europe: Standing Up to Merkel

Thursday 24 May 2018, by [KUGLER Steffen](#), [WAGENKNECHT Sahra](#) (Date first published: 24 May 2018).

We talk to Die Linke MP Sahra Wagenknecht about her controversial Aufstehen initiative and the future of the German left.

Sahra Wagenknecht is used to controversy. Beginning her political career in the chaotic period that followed German reunification in 1990, she joined the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in her twenties and was for several years a prominent member of its Communist wing.

She moved from the European Parliament to the Bundestag in 2009 shortly after the PDS joined with a left-wing split from the Social Democrats to form [Die Linke](#), and has served as cochair of the party's parliamentary group since 2010. Though she has proven to be [polarizing in Die Linke](#) and the [wider left](#), on a national level she remains the party's best-known public figure and most popular politician, with one-quarter of German voters stating they would consider voting for an electoral list headed by Wagenknecht. Her position as parliamentary group co-chair and her frequent media appearances make her Germany's most prominent left-wing politician.

She has attracted renewed controversy since 2016 by criticizing Angela Merkel's refugee policy. She has argued that the government failed to provide the necessary funds and infrastructural support to prevent the refugee influx from overburdening local governments and labor markets, thereby exacerbating social tensions in an already polarized society. These statements have generated [intense controversy](#) within her own party as well as the wider political sphere, with many accusing her of making concessions to the right as part of a wider attempt to win back working-class voters who have drifted to the far right [Alternative für Deutschland](#) (AfD).

Last year, both Wagenknecht and her partner and political ally [Oskar Lafontaine](#) began publicly discussing the need for a broad, left-populist formation to counter the rise of the Right and cohere a center-left majority in German politics capable of shifting the balance of forces in parliament. The new formation, called [Aufstehen](#) ("Stand Up"), created its online platform in [early August](#) and made its official launch with a press conference in Berlin on September 4. Its main supporters beyond Wagenknecht herself include several left-wing Social Democrats, the sociologist [Wolfgang Streeck](#) and a number of personalities from media and culture. Since then, over 150,000 people have signed up to participate in the new "movement," though its program has yet to be decided.

Aufstehen is a gamble, similar in some regards to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise. It aims to stem the growth of right-wing populism, but it aims to reach alienated voters by circumventing the existing organizations of the Left, potentially jeopardizing institutions that took generations to build. Both initiatives bring up questions about the future of the Party of the European Left, the nature of left-populism, and how best to win over people that might drift into the hands of the Right, without compromising the core internationalist values of the Left.

Jacobin founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara was in Germany in September to promote the release of a German-language collection, [Jacobin: Die Anthologie](#). He caught up with Wagenknecht to get her perspective on the Aufstehen initiative and the surrounding controversy.

BKS

After months of rumors and speculation, your new campaign, Aufstehen (“Stand Up”), has now officially launched. Can you tell us more about how it came together, and who some of the key figures have been thus far?

SW

The jumping-off point for Aufstehen was when another grand coalition government was formed by the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) after the [last federal election](#) in September 2017. This meant the continuation of the exact same policies we’ve faced in recent years — policies that subject people to very high levels of social insecurity, lead to a concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and divide society.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that our democracy doesn’t function anymore. Industrial lobbyists and the rich have much more influence than normal citizens, and right now in Germany the political right is the only group profiting from this situation. The AfD — a party that [marches in street demonstrations alongside neo-Nazis](#) — has become the leader of the opposition.

This was the point at which I said that we have to start something new, that we need a new movement to reactivate all of those people who don’t feel represented by the existing parties and to build pressure for a more socially just politics.

BKS

What other left populist formations in Europe do you see as inspirations for Aufstehen? Do you view [Podemos](#) or [La France insoumise](#) as potential models?

SW

Well, conditions differ across countries, but of course we’ve been paying attention to what Podemos is doing and especially to what’s happening in France. La France insoumise is another movement that exists outside of traditional party structures. Nevertheless, its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, received almost 20 percent of the vote in the [2017 French presidential election](#).

We also have a close connection to Momentum, the extra-parliamentary campaign behind the massive transformation of the Labour Party in the UK and the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader. We’ve been in contact with Momentum and even count some of their activists — Labour Party members living in Germany — among our ranks.

BKS

You’ve said that your mission is to place questions of social welfare back at the heart of political debate in Germany. What would these questions be? Can you name some of the concrete demands that the movement will be putting forward?

SW

Well, we definitely want to stop the trend towards ever-increasing inequality. We want to halt the expansion of the low-wage sector and ultimately abolish it entirely.

In contrast to the US and other countries with highly deregulated, [“hire-and-fire”](#) labor markets, the

existence of this sector is a relatively new phenomenon in Germany. Historically speaking, strongly regulated labor markets have been the norm here, collective-bargaining agreements were dominant. By and large, people used to have relatively secure jobs. This has changed dramatically over the past twenty years.

In a word, you could say that we want government regulations to protect people from employers if needed and from the pure profit motive. And of course, we want the state to go back to making social goods available and affordable to all, whether that be housing, health care, or pensions.

We're at a point now where everything's been privatized with increasingly skyrocketing prices. Even nursing homes and hospitals have been opened up for profit. We think that the services such institutions provide are public responsibilities that should be under public administration.

BKS

You were a member of the [Party of Democratic Socialism](#), so you've been involved with Die Linke from the very beginning, so to speak. In recent years, you've become more critical of the party's dominant orientation, and in turn parts of the party have grown increasingly critical of you. How do you explain what appears to be a growing divide between you and at least some sections of the party? And more broadly, how would you evaluate the successes and failures of Die Linke in its eleven years of existence?

SW

Die Linke definitely represents a very important success: for the first time in German history, a party to the left of Social Democracy firmly established itself in parliament, regularly receiving around 10 percent of the vote.

The goal of Die Linke was also to increase pressure on the SPD in order to force it to pursue more social-democratic policies. So far, we've been unsuccessful in this regard, which means we've had to go it alone. This is actually the motivation behind the founding of Aufstehen — I said to myself, we can't simply keep doing what we've been doing.

We need Die Linke as a party, I'm glad that it exists, and Aufstehen isn't about calling that into question. But a social opposition needs to be backed up by social pressure in order to get things done in parliament. It is the intention of Aufstehen to enhance social pressure by reaching beyond the backing lines of Die Linke alone.

BKS

You've presented a broad picture of a movement to the left of social democracy. However, a lot of existing antiracist currents in Germany have thus far distanced themselves from Aufstehen and expressed skepticism towards it. Why is this?

SW

I think that's an overgeneralization. We have members — some of whom count among the founders of our movement — who are actively involved in working with refugees and who've explicitly gotten behind Aufstehen because one of our key issues at the moment is driving back the advancing right wing in Germany and stopping people from drifting towards the Right out of anger and frustration at their social predicament.

What happened in the US, where workers in the Rust Belt ultimately elected Donald Trump, is

happening in Germany as we speak. Now of course, the AfD isn't about to win the chancellorship, but it's certainly an extremely dangerous development. For this reason, many people who are afraid of the rightward drift view our project as incredibly important.

Naturally, that includes addressing problems associated with immigration. I think it was a bad strategy for the Left to try and talk these problems out of existence or simply ignore them, thereby leaving them to the Right. And there *are* problems: as a result of the inadequate housing policy in the last years there's an extremely tense situation on the German housing market and people are competing with each other over rental apartments as rents continue to go up, particularly in poorer neighborhoods. Naturally, this will lead to people having reservations about the arrival of more refugees who will also head to the poorer quarters to find housing.

On the labor market — which, as I've mentioned, has been dramatically deregulated — competition in the low-wage sector is growing. Refugees are even explicitly used to exert downward pressure on wages, which in turn fuels anti-refugee sentiment. We have to make clear who's responsible for these problems — of course, it's not refugees. But we need to talk about these problems, even if that's difficult for some.

BKS

A lot of what many of us see as the more promising projects on the European left — what's now happening in Germany, La France insoumise, to some extent Corbyn's movement (which has been accused of being excessively in favor of Brexit) — have been accused of nationalism in the media and certain circles, an especially pejorative framing in the German context.

What would you say to these critics, and what is your stance on the specter of nationalism more generally?

SW

I consider nationalism to be irreconcilable with left-wing politics. To me, nationalism means you declare yourself superior on the basis of your background — your nationality — and denigrate other nations and cultures, view them as lesser. That, to me, is nationalism, and I fundamentally reject this kind of thinking and would under no circumstances accept catering to it.

Yet it's a completely different matter to demand that the state as it currently exists go back to exercising its regulatory power. And it seems clear to me that this globalized world of borderless capitalism — of intensifying, unrestrained capitalism — is above all a world that benefits large corporations.

Currently, there are no such thing as democratic institutions operating on a global scale. We're left only with states as more or less at least potentially functional democratic regulatory bodies. This is why Aufstehen demands that the state regulate capitalism in the interests of its citizens and set limits on the profit motive.

BKS

Over time, you've grown increasingly critical of the European Union, seeing it as a technocratic, supranational organization that takes away power from democratic governments. Do you see alternative proposals for the European left? And looking particularly at beleaguered countries in eastern and southern Europe, would you advocate that they leave the EU?

SW

I would like to see a Europe in which states and populations live together in harmony — in which mutual hatred never again breaks out. However, the European Union as it stands is a force for division that ultimately fuels nationalist movements. Brussels's Europe is an undemocratic, centralized apparatus that accelerates the dismantling of the welfare state and promotes privatization, in which Germany occupies an absolutely dominant position.

At the moment we can observe resistance to this situation in many countries. People are saying that they don't want to be governed by Berlin, and justifiably so, because they *are* in fact dominated and governed by Berlin in many respects. We saw this at the height of the European debt crisis, when our federal government dictated how Greece and other countries had to respond.

The EU has treaties that are blatantly neoliberal in their intent, with the goal of bringing about an unregulated capitalist model, of privatizing and dismantling the welfare state. If we are going to reunite Europe, we need a fundamentally different legal basis to do so. The current framework will never suffice and ultimately facilitates disintegration. We're not just seeing this right now in the UK; in Sweden we also have the [Sweden Democrats](#), a highly Eurosceptic, right-wing party that has become [very strong](#), to name only one.

BKS

On that note, the rise of the populist right came relatively late in Sweden and Germany, but now it's arrived in both countries with a vengeance. You've been criticized for trying to win back some AfD voters, or perhaps voters who are on the fence and might consider voting for the AfD. Are you trying to win over these voters in particular? Is there a danger of conceding to reactionary ideas that some might hold about immigration?

SW

We can't afford to cater to prejudices or racist sentiments. That's out of the question. However, of course we need to fight to win back AfD voters, many of whom more or less constitute the Left's classical constituency. Often these people are poorer, work unattractive jobs, receive lousy pensions, and feel left behind by politics in this country for good reason — they don't just feel this way, it's their reality. And it needs to be seen as a failure of the broader left that they've moved to the right in the first place. In many European countries where right-wing parties are gaining on left-wing ones, it's due to a failure of the Left.

That's why I think it's important to reach those people again, just as it's important to reach the many people who no longer vote at all. This represents an even bigger constituency, and one that is disproportionately poorer. I'm really excited that the people whom we're currently reaching with Aufstehen — more than 140,000 people have already signed up — are by and large unaffiliated with any party. It's clear that we're reaching a spectrum that the political parties can't anymore.

BKS

There have been [criticisms within Die Linke](#) that Aufstehen is a way of circumventing its own structures, given that it did not issue directly from the party itself. Why did you see the need to launch Aufstehen outside of Die Linke?

SW

You can't launch a nonpartisan project from within a party. It was very important to me — and fortunately we were successful in this regard — to involve people from the SPD, especially some of the more well-known figures like [Simone Lange](#), who challenged party leader Andrea Nahles from

the left at the recent SPD party congress. We also have an SPD parliamentarian and a number of highly regarded Social Democrats from the older generation, and these people would not have been open for a project designed to serve Die Linke's own interests. They simply wouldn't have been able to offer their support.

BKS

If you had to guess, how big would you say this "Left" within the SPD really is, not just in parliament, but also more broadly among their voters? Do you think the SPD voting bloc could still be won over to social-democratic ideas?

SW

I think this would be fairly difficult with the SPD functionaries, particularly on the national level, where they've been pushing a different kind of politics for many years. At the same time, more than five thousand SPD members have signed up for Aufstehen, and it's clear that the SPD's current policies have been driving away voters for years.

There was a brief moment a little over a year ago, right after [Martin Schulz](#) was named as the SPD candidate for chancellor, when there was some hope that the party would [become truly Social Democratic again](#). In the span of a few days, the party's standing in the polls rose to over 30 percent, a ten-point jump. That didn't last long, as Schulz turned out to be a [disappointment](#), but it shows how big the potential is.

BKS

Die Linke still understands itself as a democratic socialist party. You yourself grew up in nominally socialist East Germany and identified with the Communist Platform for many years. Obviously, your ideas have changed over time. What would your vision of a truly democratic socialism look like? What kind of a society should we aspire to in the long term?

SW

I think we urgently need a discussion about societies beyond capitalism which don't simply fall back on the Eastern Bloc model, or what I experienced as a child in the GDR. That system failed and no one misses it. That was a state economy.

But as I've suggested in my books — among others, my book [Prosperity without Greed](#), which is also available in English — I think there are other possible forms of property ownership. For me, a key question of any just society is whom the economy belongs to: who controls businesses, who profits from what they produce — in other words, who is profiting from other people's labor.

I believe that the relevance of Marx on this question hasn't changed, and that exploitation should be overcome by transferring the ownership of businesses to the people who work in them. Businesses should belong to their workers and not some hedge fund or family dynasty. That, to me, is a crucial question for any just society.

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