

German Left Party hunts disenchanting voters

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AFP — Germany's Left Party aims to demonstrate that it's here to stay in Sunday's election, in which it is looking for voters frustrated by the economic crisis and hostile to the country's military presence in Afghanistan.

The party emerged as a force and into parliament in 2005. A fusion of eastern German ex-communists and former Social Democrats disenchanting by cuts to the welfare state, it has been cementing itself since.

On Sunday, it should easily return to parliament. And while there is no realistic chance of it joining a national government now - it remains very much a pariah in federal politics with both leading parties ruling out a coalition with them - the party says its mere presence in parliament is enough to exert influence.

"A strong Left forces the other parties not to carry on as they have so far," a party ad published in Friday newspapers said.

Since its emergence, the party has drained votes in particular from the center-left Social Democrats, who ran Germany's government until 2005 and are now the junior partner in conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel's "grand coalition" - a government that has done little to deepen economic reform.

Its most prominent leaders are a combative former Social Democratic chairman, Oskar Lafontaine, and charismatic eastern German ex-communist Gregor Gysi. They portray Germany's other four major parties, from the conservatives to the Greens, as being largely the same - particularly on economic issues.

"We are not part of this consensus sauce," Gysi said recently.

The Left Party's wish list includes a "millionaires' tax;" to raise the top income tax rate; a high national minimum wage; a reversal of the government's decision to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67; an immediate shutdown of Germany's nuclear plants; and the dissolution of NATO.

Lafontaine has called for banks to be nationalized and for "strong regulation of financial transactions."

The Left is also calling for an end to German military missions abroad, including an immediate withdrawal of the German military from Afghanistan - the only party to do so.

"You can't bomb peace and democratic development into being," Lafontaine says of Germany's participation in NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.

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