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Germany

Build the extra-parliamentary opposition or join the Left Party?

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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The creation of the Left Party (Linkspartei) is the expression, on the political level, of the fact that neo-liberalism has passed the point of its ideological zenith. But the discussion among revolutionary socialists should only be centred on the following point: is or is not the party that is being formed capable of being transformed into a combat socialist party which tries to organise the struggles of those below and which makes extra-parliamentary social mobilisations its priority?

Class struggles and Left Party

In order to understand the political evolution of Germany, it is necessary to recall some significant struggles that were defeated in recent years. In 2003, IG-Metall called a strike for the 35-hour week in the East of the country. The union members were ill-prepared for this struggle. The union leaders of certain big car factories in the West refused to organise solidarity.

What is more, the leadership of the union had totally underestimated the political dimension of the struggle, which was faced with the unanimous resistance of capital, the media, the government and the parliamentary Right. IG-Metall then suffered a complete defeat. After the East, came the turn of the West.

In 2004, the engineering bosses frontally attacked the bastion of Daimler Chrysler in Stuttgart and demanded for the workers who were not directly productive a return to the 40-hour week. IG-Metall protested...and capitulated. Since then working hours have been increased in hundreds of enterprises, in other words wages have been lowered. [<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/pds.jpg>]

So the most powerful German union lost, in a short space of time, two battles whose consequences are accumulating to represent a defeat of the workers' movement whose scope should not be underestimated, even though the mass of the members did not take part in the battle and therefore did not experience it as a brutal defeat. However, the relationship of forces between the classes can also be transformed in a piecemeal way.

In the same way that IG-Metall won certain struggles by only organising strikes in a few enterprises, and that the gains made were subsequently extended to the whole industry concerned, now the bosses' victories at Siemens and Daimler Chrysler are being imposed in a considerable part of the engineering industry and even in other industries. Compared to that, the isolated struggles at Opel in Bochum or Alstom in Mannheim are only rearguard actions.

The wave of protests which developed, starting in the summer of 2004, against Hartz IV and the 2010 Agenda [1], was welcomed favourably by the unions, but without them actively supporting it.

The numerous local demonstrations that took place every Monday over a period of six months mobilised 150,000 people in 220 towns and cities. Between 1.5 and 2 million people, including many trade unionists, took part in at least one of them. But the unions never supported them officially.

Their leaderships refused any mobilisation against the SPD-Green government. They bear the responsibility for having allowed Schröder and Fischer to implement their plans.

All this encouraged the masses' hopes for an electoral alternative. Workers who were not able themselves to stop the neo-liberal offensive in the workplaces or in the streets are placing their hopes in those who are going to do it in Parliament. The trade union bureaucrats, groggy, who no longer believe either in themselves or in the strength of their organisations, who see their members doubting, or leaving the unions, place their hopes in Gysi and Lafontaine. The dialectic of lost battles and electoralist hopes does not reinforce the idea that electoral successes favour struggles. On the contrary.

The character of the Left Party

All the parties have drifted to the right for more than ten years, and it is social democracy that has done so most visibly, having, since the middle of the 1990s while Oskar Lafontaine was still its president, undergone a transformation that turned a social-liberal party into a neo-liberal party.

Subsequently the SPD and the Greens, the CDU/CSU and the FDP, the employers' organisations and the bourgeois media formed a Grand Neo-liberal Coalition, which was joined by whole sections of the trade union bureaucracy and by the PDS in Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, where it participates in regional governments...

The place of social-liberalism, thus left vacant on the political map, was subsequently occupied by the Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) [2] Its nucleus, made up of former members of the SPD, was not evolving to the left, but remained a prisoner of the old social-liberal positions.

These militants were already so politically isolated within the SPD that there was no regroupment established before they left the party. They resigned individually, like Lafontaine.

There was no unification congress between the PDS and the WASG. The Left Party already exists as such. The programme and the strategy of these two organisations have been taken over as they were, with no process of consultation, and so will not be the object of democratic elaboration, where the rank and file would be able to decide. Bureaucratisation is not a threat for the distant future: the party is already dominated by a bureaucracy.

The Left Party is not likely to take part some day or other in a bourgeois government: the Left party-PDS is already present in two regional neo-liberal governments. In a word: the Left Party will be what it already is today. If major struggles do not break out, it will not be transformed.

However, the Left Party is not monolithic. The internal relationship of forces is not yet definitively fixed and could reserve more than one surprise. We can distinguish at least five components. The three most important are: the majority of the PDS, with a vague socialist horizon and a very highly structured apparatus; the majority of the WASG, which has no concrete Utopia, but benefits from the know-how of its trade union full-timers; and the current grouped around Oskar Lafontaine, which criticises neo-liberalism from both left and right.

It is this current that is drawing most people towards the party, with the most dangerous mixture imaginable. There is an explosive factor there. There are also two smaller components: a minority faction of the PDS which does not base itself on the party apparatus, but on the state institutions, in other words on its participation in governments.

And finally a fifth component, which by virtue of its divisions is not in reality one: the left socialists - SAV [3] Linksruck (3) and the International Socialist Left -, and Stalinists and ex-Stalinists - [4] , DKP [5] and DIDF [6] The social-liberals of the majority of the WASG, the neo-liberal ministerialist clique of the minority of the PDS and the populists around

Lafontaine have a purely bourgeois character.

They have renounced any policy in favour of the working class, as well as abandoning the goal of socialism. On the other hand, the majority of the PDS has a dual character, inasmuch as it still defends the objective of a socialist society. And do we really have to characterise the left socialist groups who, like Linksruck, give up publicly defending revolutionary positions for tactical reasons?

The classical instruments of analysis of the workers' movement (the notions of reformism, centrism and revolutionary Marxism) do not seem to apply to this party. But if they do not apply, it is not because they are hopelessly obsolete and historically out-of-date.

These classifications have little meaning, because they only enable us to characterise two currents: the majority of the PDS (and perhaps also the DKP and the KPF) as reformist, and some organisations of the fifth current as centrist. Social-liberalism, neo-liberalism and populism are certainly very much present in the Left Party, but these are currents outside the workers' movement.

Whether or not you agree with what is being asserted here, there should not be much debate about the conclusion: by bringing together populism, social-liberalism, neo-liberalism, reformism and a centrism that does not publicly defend class struggle and socialism, you will not get a left socialist party.

The conclusion is that a critical appreciation of this party does not flow from a criticism of certain weaknesses taken in isolation, however scandalous some of its positions may be, for example the climb-downs on the question of the minimum wage.

The character of this party is determined just as much by its bureaucratic structure as by its general political and programmatic orientation. This party is not being used by a section of the working class which is radicalising; those who are employed in enterprises and who join it, have no influence on its image and its orientation. Those who claim the opposite are indulging in illusions and spreading these illusions around them.

The chances of success for the Left Party

In the next five years, it will go from success to success: in every election, the Left Party will have many people elected, with sizeable votes. With electoral success, public subsidies will flow in. There will be many seats to be occupied, as well as jobs as parliamentary assistants and full-timers for the party. Just for West Germany, that represents more jobs than the PDS and the WASG had members only a short time ago.

Money and success will attract careerists and pose the problem of participation in the federal government. The toboggan of parliamentarism will speed up the interpenetration of the party apparatus and state institutions. The battles for power, careers and money will certainly make more of a mark than the programmatic discussions during congresses. The evolution of the Greens and the PDS are striking examples of this, as are the PDS aggregates that are devoted to choosing candidates for the Bundestag.

The Left Party and the unions

Nothing illustrates better the extent of the demoralisation of the trade union bureaucracy than its support for the Left Party. Subjected to the pressure of the offensive by capital, the central apparatus around Peters (president of IG-Metall) and Bsirske (president of Verdi, the union that covers public services, the media, transport, the post and commerce, and which has 2.5 million members) are in no way counting on the strength of their organisations, on a counter-offensive in the workplaces and in the streets, but are directly and indirectly encouraging the formation of this new party...in order to exert pressure on the SPD.

It is only because that is what interests them that we can explain how so many union full-timers are able to devote a large part of their activity to the party. At the same time, the trade union bureaucracy is using the Left Party as a lightning-conductor, to divert criticism provoked by its passivity, demoralisation and disarray.

The Left Party claims to be "neutral" towards the unions. Almost none of the full-time union secretaries who occupy leading posts in the party are in open opposition to the union leaderships. The party also shares the same programmatic conceptions (co-management).

This "neutrality" does not prevent the trade union bureaucracy from intervening in the affairs of the party. The question of the minimum wage provided a practical test of this, after Bsirske, the president of Verdi, had denigrated in the bourgeois press the Left Party's demand for a legal minimum wage of 1400 euros a month. Lafontaine, the PDS minister Holter and the campaign director Ramelow did everything they could to minimise and adapt this demand, so as to establish the "realism" of the Left Party with public opinion.

The suction effect

The West German Left is basking in euphoria. Whereas for decades in West Germany the socialists got electoral results ranging from 0.1 per cent to 1 per cent, they believe they are on the verge of a breakthrough. And anyway, who would want their light to be eternally hidden under a bushel? In East Germany, where the independent socialist Left is very far from playing in the same league as the PDS, there is not the same enthusiasm; but all the same they can see the occasion to "show those above what we are capable of".

The West German socialist Left will experience important changes. The successes of the Left party will attract to it even more organised militants and exercise considerable pressure on all the strategies for party-building. An organisation like the MLPD, [\[7\]](#) which succeeds in making its members believe that it has "mass influence" and that is going from "success to success", will have difficulty facing up to the reality of the comparative electoral results.

Since all the Trotskyist organisations except the RSB are working in the Left Party, it is necessary to add a word on entrism. Even in conditions of a downswing in the class struggle, we could conceive of revolutionary socialists conducting within this party entry work that "was successful" from their point of view, of them taking part in debates, selling papers at rank-and-file level and recruiting militants clandestinely, etc...on condition that they did it in an organised way. On the other hand, for those who are content to occupy "important" positions, their original organisational framework will sooner or later appear to be superfluous and "sectarian".

But what is in any case disputable is the idea - which already seems to be practically an article of faith - that one can only be usefully politically active inside the Left Party.

Extra-parliamentary opposition

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The revolutionary socialists who are in the Left Party also insist on the importance of extra-parliamentary work. As for whether on top of all the internal debates and the election campaigns, there will be any time left for that, that is their problem.

The building of the trade union Left will not, so to speak, take place via the Left Party, even though within the unions a differentiation is taking place along party lines, between the SPD and the Left Party, which is creating the conditions for a new situation. But when social movements arise and develop, it is independently of the parties, even though it does appear that many of their activists identify with the Left Party.

Making struggles their priority should go without saying for revolutionary socialists, even if they are members of the Left Party. Furthermore, the development of the extra-parliamentary movement is the only possible way to modify the relationship of forces between the classes. It is not inside parliaments that we will be able to stop the neo-liberal offensive.

It is precisely the fact that the social question is once again at the centre of discussions that should provide encouragement to propagate anti-capitalist demands in the working class. From the Left Party, it would be absolutely impossible to publicly defend the need for a minimum legal hourly wage of 10 euros, for a minimum gross monthly income of 1500 euros, for the banning of lay-offs, for the expropriation of enterprises that make profits while destroying jobs, for the 30-hour week without loss of pay and with corresponding hiring of more workers, until everyone has a job, for the opening of the books, for the expropriation of the 756,000 dollar millionaires and for equal rights for all. For whoever wants to publicly defend a revolutionary policy, it is only possible to do so outside this party.

Independently of the governmental combinations that will come out of the Bundestag elections, and of the different possibilities of evolution and of mobilisation that they imply, it is the next stages of mobilisation that are our priority: the proposal for a major initiative in the spring of 2006, along the lines of the central demonstration in Berlin on November 1st, 2003, will be discussed in November during the "congress of the extra-parliamentary opposition".

This initiative was taken up at the German Social Forum, which is organising on November 19th and 20th a conference to discuss action and strategy. That confirms the orientation of those who want to build an extra-parliamentary opposition to break the offensive of capital. Whether we are inside or outside of the Left Party, let us do our utmost together so that the mobilisations of this spring are capable of rising to this challenge.

The article represents the point of view of the RSB, which has decided not to send its members into the Left Party which is being built. In International Viewpoint n° 369 of July-August 2005, we published an article, [Crisis of the SPD and New âEurosÜLeft Party](#), by Manuel Kellner, giving the point of view of the International Socialist Left (isl) the other public faction of the German section of the Fourth International, whose members have taken part in the building of the WASG (see Note 2) and the Left Party.

[1] Hartz IV and the 2010 Agenda represent the programme of neo-liberal counter-reforms of the Schröder government.

[2] For more information on the emergence of the WASG, see International Viewpoint 363, January 2005, "Beginnings of a Political Alternative to Neo-liberalism", by Manuel Kellner.

[3] The SAV (Socialist Alternative Forward!) is the German section of the Committee for a Workers' International (whose principal organisation is the Socialist Party, which came out of the majority of the former Militant Tendency in Britain),.

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[4] KPFThe KPF (Communist Platform) is a mainly Stalinist current in the PDS, seeking to go back to the former GDR before reunification. Its best-known representative is Sarah Wagenknecht.

[5] The DKP (German Communist Party), the old pro-Moscow party, which has 5,000 members, only exists in West Germany.

[6] The DIDF is an ex-Maoist (and ex-Stalinist) organisation among Turkish immigrants in Germany..

[7] The MLPD (Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany), Maoist, is by far the strongest force on the far Left in Germany (around 2,000 members) and is one of the biggest Maoist parties in Europe.