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Germany

Germany: change for the parties, but not yet for the class struggle

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Despite the significant losses of the SPD and the gains of the FDP, the government is not in a comfortable situation. For one thing, because of its very high dependence on exports (more than 28% of GDP) and the comparatively low share of internal consumption, the German economy will end 2009 having shrunk by around 5%.

As the international conjuncture is not really improving, a whole series of enterprises are threatened with bankruptcy. We are talking about companies which are "fundamentally sound" according to classical capitalist criteria, but which today suffer from a lack of liquidity, because the banks are taking less risks or loans are dispensed at extortionate rates reflecting the estimated risk. If the world economy does not start to seriously recover in the coming months, in some regions up to 25% of mechanical construction and installation enterprises will be heading for bankruptcy. In the car industry also, whose role is very important (770,000 direct or indirect jobs; a production of 6.2 million cars per year before the crisis, of which a large proportion are exported) production overcapacity of nearly 30% at the world level makes the threat of massive layoffs very real.

Meanwhile, the deficit in public finances will exceed 100 billion euros in 2010. This is due to the fall in tax income and increased social expenditure. The state must then borrow more, at the risk of finding itself one day unclassified by the international rating institutes. We are a long way from state bankruptcy, but credit will become dearer, and the margins of manoeuvre narrower. Local government bodies will face greater difficulties in meeting their "normal" obligations.

That is why, from the viewpoint of the bourgeoisie, the simplest and most urgent solution would be to increase taxes. That would have been much easier with the SPD than with the FDP, which has made tax cuts its centrepiece and seeks to impose a 20-25 billion euro tax cut for the rich.

The alternative to tax increases would be a large scale austerity programme in the social sector. This is no longer an obvious way out, because the trade union bureaucracy would have cooperated with the SPD in a manner which it would not do with the CDU and still less its sworn enemy the FDP. Thus the new government must satisfy the rich (in particular through tax cuts) while not making it impossible to rebalance the budget.

That is why it is doing nothing that the unions might take as a provocation: no threats against co-management, protection against dismissals, wage negotiation procedures codified in the law on works councils. All things that in other circumstances would be among the priorities of a CDU-FDP government. Because what matters above all else for the dominant class is the immediate improvement of economic conditions for capital. Any measure which is not reflected by an identifiable gain is then ruled out.

Obviously the opposite is true at enterprise level where layoff plans abound. Even so, the governmental programme contains more than platitudes: a reduction of the resources devoted to the "labour market" (which will make it more difficult, indeed impossible, to set up programmes of qualification, return to work and reconversion, and this will throw those dismissed straight into unemployment), rights of lessors strongly strengthened, suppression of some branch minimum wages (there is no national minimum wage in Germany). The FDP wants to impose a flat rate individual supplement for sickness insurance and so on. But none of this is linked to political attacks against the unions.

Why this prudence?

1. Nothing is more precious than a situation in which the unions keep quiet;
2. At the elections to the Bundestag, participation fell from 77.7% to 70.8%, which reflects a general increase in disaffection with the "dominant politics";
3. The reformist party Die Linke has grown and has been able to attract some former SPD voters;
4. The government knows that even after the crisis ends, significant factors of instability will remain. Thus the number of unemployed will grow still further, and with this popular anger. Today already the feeling of insecurity is widespread, even if most people have not yet directly felt the effects of the crisis. But when the number of unemployed goes beyond a certain psychological threshold, suddenly millions will be in a more serious situation than today.

Since mid-October, the degradation is clear: bankruptcy for the "Quelle" distribution group (with thousands out of work as a consequence), followed by the announcement that Opel had not been bought out and that General Motors was "restructuring", meaning more dismissals and so on.

The legislative elections did not involve a left-right confrontation. The SPD has followed neoliberal policies for some years. Following the electoral disaster it has announced no significant change of orientation. All the full timers, from the top to the bottom of the apparatus, have been trained in the politics of social dismantling. Those who disagreed have long since gone over to Die Linke.

The Greens have not been a party of the left since the 1990s. They voted for Agenda 2010, the most significant programme of social destruction in the history of the Federal Republic. And for the first time since the Second World War, they have allowed the German bourgeoisie to again participate actively in wars, first in the Balkans, then in Afghanistan.

Only Die Linke differs from the neoliberal parties. It is a reformist party, comparable to the Parti de Gauche in France (Mélenchon has good and privileged relations with Lafontaine). Its political limits are very visible and each time it announces its participation in a regional government its true colours come to light: first in the Land of Mecklenburg West-Pomerania and Berlin, today in Brandenburg.

In Brandenburg, the SPD could have continued to govern with the CDU but preferred to join Die Linke in government so as to integrate and compromise the party. Die Linke could no longer accuse the regional government of being "antisocial". As coming to government is its ultimate goal, Die Linke considers this coalition a "great success in itself". The concrete effects have been a coalition programme envisaging the suppression of 11,000 jobs in the public sector, as well as the extension of the extraction of lignite and the operation of thermal power stations fuelled by lignite, the source of a particularly polluting energy.

We do not yet know where the opposition will come to the attacks, which will certainly get worse after the coming elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in early May. A lot depends on developments in the unions. They have been the only force with any possibility of influencing what happens in the workplaces and at the central level. Since the 1990s, they have increasingly adapted to neoliberal policies, accepting "co-management" while avoiding conflicts with capital or the government. When the SPD was in government they did not even mobilise against retirement at 67, the work of the social democrat Müntefering. This is not only a consequence of the close links of the trade union bureaucracy with the SPD, but also the product of the bureaucratic system itself: thus the integration into the workplace councils leads one to think like the other members of these councils, salaries are exorbitant, the apparatus enormous (for example, at the IG Metall headquarters there are 600 full timers, in the regions several thousand well

paid full timers, Huber, the president of the union, earns 218,000 euros a year!)

That said, the German unions are not “yellow” unions. They remain worker’s organisations which depend on the will and commitment of their members. When anger mounts, the unions (and to a certain degree even the union bureaucracies) can be pushed into struggle (at least a little), which will have effects on the general political climate, the breadth of the government “reforms” as well as on the new possibilities offered to the forces opposing the capitalist system. That is why the RSB stresses unions work and the construction and leadership of the union left.

And that is also why the RSB (one of the two public factions of the Fourth International in Germany) is committed to organising the social movement. The coalition “Wir zahlen nicht für eure Krise” (“We won’t pay for their crisis”) initiated a national demonstration last March 28 in Berlin and Frankfurt, supported by 55,000 people. This led the unions to organise their own demonstration on May 16 in Berlin, with 100,000 participants. It isn’t enough, but it is a beginning.

The trade union left and a good part of the social movement are agreed on developing propaganda for a general strike. Today, the unions are very far from adopting such a perspective, especially as there are many legal obstacles in Germany as in other countries to this and political strikes are explicitly banned. But obviously once a movement has been launched, these questions will be settled by the masses and not the courts.

What role will Die Linke play?

1. This party wants to govern. It is not opposed to the capitalist system but to neoliberalism.
2. Its demands are narrow and do not go beyond the limits imposed by the capitalist system or even those of the left wing of the trade union apparatus. For example, on the minimum wage, Die Linke demands it be fixed at 8.44 Euros. Following the demonstrations last March it took up the demand for 10 Euros per hour, but “Not immediately, when we are in the federal government”, and after a transitional phase of 4 years.
3. It does not participate in the construction of the trade union left, it seeks to have good relations with the trade union leaderships, in the reformist and parliamentarist tradition, but at the same time some of its activists play a leadership role in the social movements.
4. At the level of general politics, Die Linke represents a fragmentary and inconsistent alternative, but it is a new phenomenon in a country which has not heard an “anti-neoliberal” discourse or argument for decades.