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Germany

Migration policies are the key question

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In Germany the role of the “European question” has changed considerably since the introduction of the single currency and – even more so – since the “Greek crisis”. Until the early 2000s, there was very little resistance to the European Union and to European integration generally. Everybody was pleased by the progressive disappearance of border controls. The introduction of the single currency also facilitated foreign holidays (representing around 40% of German holidaymakers), so why worry?

Opposition to the single currency and to contributions to the EU

But, from 2005, a movement of conservative economists (including Bernd Lucke) demanded a turn in the approach to the debt (returning to a nationalist policy). They also demanded a fall in wages, so as to remedy the “German disease” which was supposedly sapping the country’s competitive capacity. It was against this background that Bernd Lucke (an economist at Hamburg university, then a member of the CDU and a European Parliament deputy) created in 2013 the AfD (Alternative for Germany). At the centre of their programme was opposition to the single currency and to contributions to the EU. The loss of the national currency was deplored and the return to the Deutschmark was presented as the main remedy for the evils of society. But above all: the single currency risked losing the benefits of German austerity, which should not be sacrificed for the EU. National independence should be prioritised, as “we can’t pay for the others” and so on.

With the Greek crisis in 2014-2015, this “argument” became increasingly accepted and the AfD (supported on this point by most of the press) – complained that Germany was paying the costs of the “lazy Greeks”. This was the background to the governmental policy, and at the same time it was the moment for nationalists of every stripe to join the AfD. The latter swung ever more to the far right. Lucke was removed from the leadership (he founded a new party which did not survive) as was his successor, Frauke Petry, while the party’s profile increasing resembled that of other right-wing populist formations in Europe. Today the party is openly racist and is in the sphere of activity of a number of fascists.

Facts don’t matter

In reality it is above all Germany, Austria, Holland and Finland who benefit from the EU. First by the increase of exports from German industry. Germany’s surpluses (235 billion euros in 2017) equivalent to 8% of GDP, are increasingly strangling a significant part of the industries of southern Europe. No other country benefits from the single currency as much as Germany, with moreover historically low interest rates (at the moment German state borrowing is done at negative rates).

Of course, the German (and French) banks profit from the Greek crisis. And not only does Berlin dictate what the Greek government must do, but it is also the German state budget which benefits from the “stability” of the situation. This doesn’t stop the bourgeois parties (including the social democrats) from pushing still more the line of “not paying for the others”. The new finance minister, the social democrat Olaf Scholz, is opposed to the installation of the banking union which would ensure a guarantee of a rescue of a failing bank by other banks at the European level. From the viewpoint of capitalist integration and the construction of the EU – or rather of saving the EU – it would be

wise to establish this union since an explosion of the crisis (not only at the level of the banks) in Italy would be the end of the EU. But the government's policy precisely expresses the fact that in the final instance it is always national interests which prevail.

2015: happiness for all kinds of racists!

The very brief "migrant summer" in 2015 demonstrated the solidarity extended by a good part of the German population towards refugees. This is explained above all by the fact that the people had for some years seen the number of drowned victims in the Mediterranean. But at the same time the racists (AfD and others) used the arrival of more than a million refugees to raise fears ("they will steal our jobs, our houses" and so on). This gave a huge boost to the AfD which, from this time, broadly shaped the public debate (directly and indirectly). It called for the massive closure of the borders – the most extremist wing of the AfD called for the refugees to be fired upon, and the mass expulsion of those already here, and so on.

As this discourse is absolutely coherent with the racist logic of the other bourgeois parties and as the policy of the AfD has the advantage of appearing more consistent, it can influence all the other parties, including the social democrats. The CSU (the Bavarian branch of the Christian Democrats) thus tries to apply the policy that the AfD propagates, hoping to reduce its influence. But the opposite is clearly happening. Why vote for the copy (CSU) and not for the original? Today (mid-July) the AfD is at 15-17.5%, the SPD at 17-19%. It would not be surprising if the AfD soon overtakes the SPD. And with reason: the SPD fears that the "grand coalition" (Merkel's Christian Democrats and the SPD) is a failure, and that the SPD will be ousted from the government. Thus, the SPD adapts to Merkel's policy of – step by step – closing the border, strengthening Frontex, increasing expulsions and so on.

The underlying reasons for the rise of the AfD

The installation of "Agenda 2010" by the SPD chancellor Schröder represented the most significant destruction of social rights in Germany since the Second World War. The most serious effects have been a significant fall in unemployment benefits and greater precarity of jobs, so that Germany now has the most developed precarious sector in Europe.

Hence a widely spread fear of losing one's job, becoming precarious, seeing one's standard of living fall considerably, of being excluded from society. In eastern Germany – where there have "traditionally" been few immigrants and still less refugees from the 2015-2017 period – we can add the fact that wages are (depending on the sectors) from 12 to 22% lower than in western Germany, the unemployment rate is twice as high as the west, small towns are in the process of becoming depopulated and so on. It is very promising territory for the AfD: at the last federal elections, it scored 22.5% in east Germany. Thus, with significantly less refugees in eastern Germany, but with a standard of living lower than that of the east and the feeling of being excluded and without perspectives, it is clear that it is above all the social question which paves the way for the racists.

In this atmosphere of a progression of the right and far right, the governments of the Bundesländer (federal states) are increasing police and legal repression, preparing new laws which – for example – authorise police searches even without proof of a danger, with the suspicion of a crime being prepared sufficing as pretext.

Far right mobilisations and counter-mobilisations

In this context, far right mobilisations have multiplied, as – happily – have those of anti-racists and anti-fascists. In Cologne, there was in early July a mobilisation of 8,000 people demanding effective aid to castaway refugees. Ten days later, on July 17, interior minister Seehofer (CSU) came to Düsseldorf to defend his policy of expulsions, but when a crowd as big as that in Cologne assembled in the streets, he cancelled the visit (officially it was postponed for technical reasons).

For almost two years, the EU question has not been in the foreground, but it could once again become a very divisive question in the event of an aggravation of the debt crisis (in Greece or Italy). Since 2015, immigration policy (and thus the question of the closure of the borders) has become the key question for all the parties, but also in the debates of the left and the revolutionary left. The Die Linke party has largely maintained its position of defence of migrants' rights, but this is not the case for Sahra Wagenknecht and Oskar Lafontaine, who are preparing the foundation (planned for September) of a rallying movement. Their supporters include many nationalists (even from the right), and their project seems visibly inspired by Mélenchon and La France insoumise (and like the latter, this project is top-down, without any construction from below). So, it looks to have very little chance of success, and the sole effect will probably be to divide the left rather than rally it. This "movement" favours a regulation of immigration, thus a sizable concession to the AfD, in the hope of reducing the influence of the latter. A colossal farce.

Fortunately, the majority in Die Linke, and the great majority of the extra-parliamentary left and above all the revolutionaries (including the ISO), defend the rights of migrants, and are saying loud and clear:

Down with Frontex! Open the borders! Help the castaways!
Halt the expulsions!
Stop arms exports!
Revise all the free trade treaties ruining societies in Africa and elsewhere!

PS:

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