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Germany

On the 2025 German elections

- Features -

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Promise Li, a socialist from Hong Kong now based in Los Angeles, interviews Jakob Schäfer for [Borderless](#). Jacob is a retired steelworker, having served on the steering committee of the Network for Fighting Trade Unions (VKG). He is also a member of the International Sozialistische Organization (ISO) and the editor of the magazine Die Internationale. Promise is a member of Tempest Collective and Solidarity, and has been active in higher education rank-and-file union work, international solidarity and antiwar campaigns, and Chinatown tenant organizing.. The interview was conducted on 25 February 2025 and appeared in Borderless on February 2025.

What are some of the major issues in the backdrop of the German elections?

In recent years, German society, as in other countries, has been very much dominated by the economic crisis. That is a primary issue in politics. For more than two years, we have had a recession. This is the crucial background for all the parties that want to govern and form a government. Of course, it is a permanent feature of all capitalist parties to find a scapegoat for this crisis. The far-right blames the migrants, claiming that they are responsible for everything wrong. It proclaims that we must stop the migration coming to Germany, and deal with the rest of the problems only after closing the borders. The right has grown over the last ten years on this line, from having around 8-9 percent to now over 20 percent of votes in elections today. The other parties in the center have been pulled further to the right with this development. So, it is not only the extreme right that wants to stop immigration. The liberals merely say they would do it in a 'better', more legal, way. They accept most of the proposals of the extreme right, so this issue of immigration dominated the whole election campaign over the last four months.

And so, there is a big coalition of bourgeois parties that will strengthen policies against migration. If you look at the extreme right, besides migration, they want to cut back taxes for the rich and are against trade union rights. They say trade unions disturb our economy. But unfortunately, many German workers believe migration must be stopped and that this would help us. They don't look at what the extreme right wants in terms of other broader policies, like taxation, trade union rights, etc. The proportion of voters for the far-right is just as high in the working class as in the rest of the population.

So we will have a new government led by the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with the extreme-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as a key part of the opposition, pushing other parties more to the right. It will take 2-3 months to form a new government. But the social democrats do not want to draw some lessons from defeat. All they want to change is replacing some leading personnel. They refuse to reevaluate their policies. In our view, they are not a workers' or left party. Today, they are center-left and succumb very much to the anti-migration mood in the majority of bourgeois politicians. These ruling parties refuse to understand Germany's economic ills as a systemic issue linked to the capitalist system.

Can you say more about the overall state of the German left, and how they are responding to these political and economic developments?

The major force on the German left is still Die Linke. Die Linke is a reformist party with about 3-4 percent in the opinion polls three months ago. They have faced stagnation and internal crises in recent years. But by this election, they were among the only political parties supporting migrants' rights against repressive migration politics. This helped to build them up again, and they ultimately received more than 8 percent in the election. People voted for them because they supported workers, trade unions, and other humanitarian issues. But Die Linke does not have a program of socialist politics. Some small radical left groups, around or less than 1000 members, are working in that

party. However, the radical left would not be able to change the party. Die Linke is deeply rooted in parliamentarianism. It is very institutionalized. They don't want to think beyond mobilizing social movements beyond the parliament.

The left in Die Linke is very differentiated. Some are in trade unions, and many are in climate justice, or the broader movement against the far right. The left is not very united, except for special events. But there is no dominant organization of the radical left. It is difficult for the left to come together, and most do not understand how to fight in the trade unions, the only social force that can change anything in Germany. However, trade unions in Germany are dominated by a very strong bureaucracy. So you have to build up an oppositional current of rank-and-file workers inside them to put pressure on bureaucratized leadership. We are invested in this work, but we are a very small minority. And so, the radical left in trade unions has been quite marginal and has no real impact on the general direction of the trade unions. This is the main challenge that activists in Die Linke and outside of it will have to meet for the next few years.

There are two main left tendencies in Die Linke. The most important one is the Die Antikapitalistische Linke (AKL). One of our ISO comrades, Thies Gleiss, is in the leadership of this tendency. He is also representing this current in party leadership. He is one of the few left members in party leadership. ISO has some members in Die Linke, but most, like myself, are in trade union and other work outside of the party. A second current, though smaller and less well-organized, is the Bewegungslinke. Outside of Die Linke, there is one Maoist organization in Germany that has over a thousand members, though they are quite sectarian. There are 6-7 organizations from different Trotskyist traditions—less than 1000 members combined. Apart from that, there are various autonomous or anarchist movements, especially those fighting for climate justice, that are less linked to the traditional workers' movement.

The emergence of groups like AfD and Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) represents an alarming trend in German politics. But these are not formed in the traditional mold of far-right politics. How would you characterize them and explain the rise of AfD in these elections, as well as the rise and decline of BSW?

AfD is not a fascist organization, though I would say around a third of its members are fascist. We should not underestimate the influence of fascism in the party, but the party is a right-populist, not a fascist party (similar to Fratelli d'Italia in Italy and Rassemblement national in France). The AfD does not have fighting groups that attack the left in the streets, partly because they don't need it. The AfD's program calls for greater exploitation of the working class, with policies that make the rich even richer and further defund the social security system. Unfortunately, most people don't understand that; most just look at migration as the main topic deciding their votes.

The Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which fuses ideas from the left and the far right, has roots in Die Linke. They split partly because of their stance on Palestine. That is almost the only advantage they have over Die Linke. Apart from that, all the rest is quite bad. The BSW hopes to organize the workers' movement by also opposing immigration, thus aligning with the far-right. Not only is this a dangerous platform, but it is hard to imagine how one would challenge AfD by further conceding to their views. If someone wants to stop migration, they would just vote for AfD—they don't need another party. This is why the BSW only received under 5 percent in the elections and now with no representatives in parliament. If you are against migration, you will vote for the 'original' party that proposed it—for the right. The BSW does not have a winning platform.

In the face of this new government, what should the socialist left do to challenge the growing hegemony of the right in German politics?

We must continue fighting AfD meetings that take place in every town or when the AfD demonstrates against migration. We must always try to block them. This work must continue. But that is only one level. To effectively fight the right, we need a clear program of left politics, not just explaining what fascism is. Explaining the past

catastrophes of Nazi fascism would not convince people to not vote for AfD. The left needs a positive alternative for working people. Uniting around this political alternative is the main challenge. We can campaign outside the parties and parliament, but at the same time, we need to build up a left tendency in the unions that would present an alternative. Without the support of the working classes, we don't have the means to convince people that there is another way to solve the problem of our crisis.

One key demand the left must organize around is supporting auto workers against the decline of their industry, and demanding the transformation of what this industry produces. The most important branch of German industry is the car industry. But the car industry in Germany is in a huge crisis because Chinese cars are cheaper, and the market is full of other commodities from everywhere beyond China. The car industry cannot expand as it sells fewer cars and produces redundancies across workplaces. We cannot be content with policies that compromise with the bosses, including simply extending more time for workers who face redundancy. We must have a solution fighting for conversion of the auto industry to build buses, trams, cycles, and other useful things for society, and not make redundancies and guarantee profits of bosses. To fight for this program of conversion, we need large mass movements, grounded in workers fighting in trade unions. This would only work if workers want to fight for it—this is a crucial task in the coming years to energize the working class to reshape the trajectory of German politics.

How have international politics informed the German elections? More specifically, how has the growing US-China rivalry shaped German politics, and do you anticipate any changes in government response toward the increasingly repressed Palestine solidarity movement in Germany?

German politics is under the influence of US politics. The US wants to make Germany an ally in the fight against China. But the German bourgeoisie is not on that line (yet), because their interests are quite linked to the Chinese economy. They do not want to interrupt this commodity flow between China to Germany. If this is cut, it would be another source of pressure on the German economy, similar to the Nord Stream gas line disruption from Russia to Germany. The exchange of commodities with China is very important for Germany for now, I do not foresee the German bourgeoisie aligning with Trump's anti-China campaign. But at the same time, they are not strong enough to fight for a different line. Partly, the German government is on the side of the US, especially regarding US military presence around China. However, this is not necessarily the long-term future, though I can't see that this situation will change much in the next few months. It would be suicidal for German capitalists to cut the links with China. As for everyday people in Germany, the question of China has yet to loom very large in their consciousness.

Regarding Palestine, we have a unique situation because the official German political line is that they will defend Israel no matter how genocidal policies are. This is common to all the bourgeois parties in Germany. They call it the *raison d'être* of Germany. They must admit now, after a year of genocide, that not everything done by the Israeli army is correct, but nevertheless, they continue delivering arms. They are the second biggest deliverer of arms to Israel, after the US. They support the Israeli government on the diplomatic level on every issue. In line with this, they say that if you criticize the Israeli government, it is antisemitic. It is a tough fight, as protesting against Israeli politics in Germany is really difficult. There are dozens of protestors, at least, who have lost their jobs or charged because they were for the Palestinian cause. This situation, unfortunately, will continue. I don't think the politics of the incoming government would change too much on this matter.

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