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Germany

Political boredom, social awakening in Germany?

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The general elections in Germany scheduled for 26 September will decide the next government, and therefore the new Chancellor. A “change of era” after 16 years of Angela Merkel’s undisputed rule. However, the campaign does not interest many people. Unusually for Germany, the social news has overshadowed the electoral campaign, especially with a major strike by railway workers and struggles in hospitals.

A worn-out political campaign

From the beginning, the campaign’s sole theme has been the ability of the main candidates to step into the shoes of the great Merkel. Not a word about hospitals, a few snippets about unemployment and ecology... And some small, almost comical, scandals.

Annalena Baerbock, the Green candidate, was leading in the polls in March, acclaimed by industrialists rallying to the ecological transition (and the subsidies that go with it). Six months later, after the revelation of a few embellished lines on her CV and accusations of plagiarism, the Greens dropped to third place. They made themselves look ridiculous by depriving themselves of lists in Hesse, following a procedural error. Even the deadly floods in July, which brutally brought to the fore the consequences of climate change and uncontrolled urbanization, did not reverse the momentum.

Another of the three “big” candidates suffered as a result of this disaster: Armin Laschet, Merkel’s designated successor chosen by the conservative CDU and Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, one of the most affected regions. His management was widely criticized, and he was filmed playing on his mobile phone and laughing at a commemoration for the victims. So, it is now Olaf Scholz – of the SPD – who is leading the way. As Merkel’s vice-chancellor, his main success is to have avoided this kind of blunder.

At the end of the vote, it will probably be necessary to play the game of multicoloured coalitions: a new “grand coalition” government (SPD/CDU)? Or “red-red-green” (left-wing, SPD and Green party)? Or green-black (Greens-CDU)? Or a red-yellow-green “traffic light” coalition (Green, SPD, liberal FDP)? The predictions are rife, and all the colours of the rainbow are involved, despite the dull greyness of this campaign.

A more colourful social campaign

Fortunately, there has been more encouraging news! Since July, repeated strikes have paralysed German trains. Against a backdrop of rivalries between unions and attacks on union plurality that allows outbidding, the minority GDL union twice called for two days of strike action, then six days which received strong support.

The demands of the union leadership are timid: a Covid bonus revised downwards, and wage increases that barely compensate for inflation. But the determination of the strikers is strong. Above all, they are fighting for better working conditions and the maintenance of their supplementary pension. While they have been working through the pandemic, Deutsch Bahn has nothing planned for them... while it rewards its directors handsomely! It is likely that new strikes will be announced in the coming days.

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At the same time, there have been many dynamic demonstrations by caregivers in Berlin, for hiring and a collective agreement common to all. A strike was initially banned by the courts, but a new call for an unlimited strike has been launched in recent days by the two largest hospital bodies (Vivantes and Charité). And on Thursday, 10 September, there was a day of strike action by commercial workers, as well as mobilizations against rising rents in Berlin and major demonstrations against a new security law in the Ruhr region.

The leader of the GDL, Claus Weselsky, himself a member of the CDU, insinuates that it would be necessary to vote Green to develop the railways... but we do not really expect a “supreme saviour”, whoever it is. And for good reason: in Berlin, it is a government coalition bringing together social democrats, ecologists and the so-called radical left that currently bans strikes by hospital workers and is dismantling public hospitals. Asked about Marx a few months before the railway workers’ strike, Weselsky said: “That smacks of class struggle, we don’t do that here”. But on the contrary, it seems we do...

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