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New parties of the left

The Left Party in Germany – An analysis

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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The Left Party is fighting for “a society in which no child has to grow up poor, in which all men and women can live a self-determined life in peace, dignity, and social security and can democratically shape social relations.” In order to achieve this, it demands “a different economic and social system: democratic socialism.” [1] That is how the Left Party formulated its programmatic approach in its new Erfurt Party Programme of 2011.

This involves the linkage of three basic ideas: First, the idea of individual freedom and the ability of all to develop their personalities through socially equal participation, under conditions of a self-determined life and of solidarity; second, the idea of subordination of the economy to development in solidarity, and to the preservation of nature; and third, the idea of the realization of both of these goals by means of an emancipatory and transformational process, “in which the dominance of capital will be overcome by democratic, social, and ecological forces and the society of democratic socialism will emerge.” [2] In this paper, I would like to show which potentials the Left Party has for such a challenging perspective.

The Left Party’s Position in the German Party System

The political landscape in Germany has changed greatly since the federal parliamentary elections of 2005. First, with the Left Party, a nationwide party considerably to the left of the Social Democrats (SPD) has established itself. Second, other new political actors have emerged as well. First, the Pirate Party achieved success at the state level in 2011 and 2012, although it may now be headed for oblivion. Then, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) only barely missed achieving the 5 percent threshold for representation in the Bundestag in the 2013 election, but then easily won seats in the June 2014 election for the European Parliament and, later that year, in the state parliaments of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. At the same time, the Liberal Party, the FDP, appears to be making its final bow on the political stage, although that is not yet certain. The party system in the Federal Republic is thus in motion as it has not been since the early 1950s, a fact that points to fundamental changes in the societal lines of conflict in the country. The FDP, a party with an economic (neo)liberal program that is both pro-European and culturally liberal, has collapsed into virtual irrelevance both at the federal level and, since the 2013 election, at the state level wherever elections have been held. At the same time, we are witnessing the almost unchecked rise of a national-conservative, Euro-sceptical and value-conservative party with ultra-right-wing tendencies: the AfD. Since 2013 it has gained ground in all elections, obtaining double-digit results in the last three state-level parliamentary elections. The entry of the AfD into the parliamentary system is a challenge not only to the “bourgeois camp” – the term that has traditionally encompassed Angela Merkel’s conservative CDU/CSU plus the FDP – but also to the entire political system. In the federal election of 2013, this party was able to attract two million voters from all other parties, including more than 340,000 Left Party voters. This phenomenon was repeated in the state-level parliamentary elections in 2014: between 15,000 and 20,000 voters who had previously supported the Left Party switched to the AfD. That means that the Left Party has lost a measure of its effectiveness as a protest party to a right-wing populist competitor, which even boasts that the Left Party holds similarly Euro-sceptical positions to its own. One might say that a new party first established itself to the left of the SPD, and now the same process is occurring to the right of the conservatives.

Voters who switched from the Left Party to the AfD mostly consist of two groups: those who want to “protest” at the polls by voting for the new “protest party,” and ideological conservatives who feel that their views are best articulated by the populist right. Their rejection of modern life-styles oftentimes includes hostility towards immigrants and asylum seekers. Parts of the middle class who are threatened by downward mobility actually reject redistributive policies

demand by the Left Party. In the European elections of May 2014, opposition to the European Union and the demand to get rid of the euro and reintroduce the D-Mark was also popular among these conservative voters.

Particularly in the federal parliamentary elections of 2013, and even more so in the European elections of 2014, it has been shown that the European dimension has long since made its mark on national political debates and the existing political system. The reasons for this are to be found in the crisis of European integration, the social crises in Europe, and the solutions being prescribed for these crises, which are meeting with widespread dissatisfaction. The majority of people in Germany would like to see the country and hence themselves do well once again, which is one of the reasons why, with the crisis in the southern countries of Europe raging, they voted for sitting Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, this view is not uncontroversial. The AfD has also formulated a fundamental critique of the European course of the CDU, also raised by parts of the population. The Left Party, by contrast, has attempted to link its critique of the EU's institutions and its crisis management with social and democratic perspectives, and with issues related to asylum-seekers and refugees for a peaceful, social, and democratic Europe for all. However, in European elections, it has evidently been less successful than in federal parliamentary elections in mobilizing its voters: In 2014 the Left Party won 7.5 percent, and could thus do no more than confirm its results of the previous European elections in 2009, which had yielded 7.4 percent. In view of the threat of low voter turnout, the Left Party primarily campaigned as a national party, with the same demands it had raised during the federal election the previous year. It thus eschewed any conceptual linkage between the national and European dimensions of the crisis, which in Germany, the purported land of the crisis profiteers and for at least part of society, this is true needs to be carried out in equal measure with respect both to German EU policy and domestic policy. This debate was at least to some extent abandoned to the AfD in the European election campaign.

However, in the federal parliamentary election of 2013, the Left Party won 8.6 percent, less than its very good results achieved in 2009. [3] Nonetheless the Party managed to finish just ahead of the Greens (8.4 percent) and thus took third place, becoming the strongest opposition party with 64 members of Parliament, compared with 76 in 2009. Its seven members of the European Parliament sit with the GUE/NGL Parliamentary Group, and the Left Party is represented in ten of the sixteen state parliaments in Germany, with a total of 160 MPs. In the recent election in the state of Thuringia, it won its best result to date with 28.6 percent, which, thanks to the weakness of the SPD in that state (12.4 percent), has opened the way to a "red-red-green" (Left Party-SPD-Greens) state government under the leadership of a Left Party premier. However, such a government in Thuringia would have only a very narrow majority of a single seat; whether this will work out remains to be seen during the coming days, weeks, and months. In Brandenburg, the Party's situation is different; there, in spite of massive losses (over 100,000 Left Party voters stayed home), they will now be able to once again form a coalition under SPD leadership.

I might add that over 400 Left Party members hold full-time positions as elected representatives at the local level in districts, municipalities, and communities, and another 6,500 have been elected as representatives of the Left Party or of local left-wing lists to unpaid positions in the local councils of smaller communities.

According to its own claim, the Left Party is the party of social justice, and the representative of the interests of all socially disadvantaged people in society, and of all those who seek a different, more socio-ecological and democratic societal model including those who want to overcome capitalism. It receives an above-average share of the votes of workers (13 percent in the federal election of 2013) and the unemployed (23 percent), and an average share of white-collar employees (8 percent) and pensioners (8 percent). It has less support among the self-employed, only 6 percent of whom voted for the Left Party. It still attracts a higher proportion of male than of female voters, and it is still true, 25 years after the overthrow of the East German regime, that it is possible to describe two different Left Party electorates: one eastern, one western. Although a bare majority of Left Party voters now lives in the western states, its average percentage share there in the 2013 federal election was only 6.5 percent, as opposed to 8.6 percent in 2009. With the exception of Bremen, Hamburg, and the Saarland, the three smallest western states, the Left Party came in behind the Greens and even the FDP, and just ahead of the Pirate Party. In the East German states the situation is very different. There the Left Party came in second overall, averaging 21.6 percent, down from 26.4

percent in 2009, and still retains its character as a “mass party” (“Volkspartei”), which in German political parlance means a party capable of attracting and holding voters from a broad range of societal segments. The results of the 2014 European elections were similar: in eastern Germany 19.6 percent of participating voters cast their ballots for the Left Party, while in western Germany it was only 5.3 percent. However, the difference is that the Left Party was surpassed by the newly established AfD in all the western territorial (as opposed to city-) states.

The greatest difference between Left Party voters in the eastern and western German states was their age structure, which points to a serious problem for the Left Party. In the eastern states, the Left Party in 2013 won 27.5 percent of voters in the sixty-to-seventy age cohort, and 25 percent of voters over seventy. That means that almost 50 percent of eastern German voters are aged sixty or above, while only one in four is between forty-five and fifty-nine, and only 23 percent are less than forty-five years old. By contrast, in the West the Left Party achieved its best results in the twenty-five-to-thirty-four age cohort, with 6.8 percent, while it had its lowest level of support in the over-seventy group—only 2.8 percent. Clearly the Left Party is threatened by demographic shrinking processes in the eastern states, as the generations of the post-upheaval (1990) era, who saw “their” party as the representative of social justice and especially of East German interests, diminish. Many of these voters were also members of the state-supporting strata in East Germany which, with German unification, were threatened by both real and symbolic devaluation.

The same developments can be seen in the membership of the Left Party. The Party has over 63,700 members, of which 37 percent are women, although the eastern state branches have female shares of between 43 and 45 percent, compared with an average of only 27 percent in the West. With the growing share of young, active western German members, both the language and the image of the former “eastern” party have changed. In 2005, shortly after the present party was formed by a merger between the old East German party and a West German initiative (WASG), 90 percent of the 61,000 party members were from the eastern states; by 2013 that figure had dropped to 60 percent. This means that almost 40 percent of the membership now comes from the old West German states, or else they consider themselves to be neither East Germans nor West Germans.

The age structure of the Left Party membership, too, is a problem. The average age in the eastern state branches is above sixty-five; in West Germany, it is approximately fifty. Only 10 percent of party members are aged thirty or less, while only 20 percent are between thirty and fifty, and some 40 percent are over sixty-five. That means that the Party faces the urgent overall task of party development and the recruitment of new members. Between 2009 and 2012 organizational development was almost entirely neglected. Power struggles and disputes over the perspective of the party, and its role as an opposition party, a party of struggle, or a mass party, characterized its image as an internally contentious group that was moreover facing a leadership crisis. Only the adoption of the new Erfurt Party Programme in 2011 and the overcoming of the leadership crisis were able to end this process and restabilize the party. As a result, the consequences of the neglected organizational structure and process are unmistakable. Since 2009 the Left Party has been unable, especially at the local level, to nominate enough party members to fill all the seats that it will win, so that regardless of any debate over whether it is a membership, cadre, or functionaries’ party, there is and inevitably will continue to be a multiple occupation of offices at the local and regional level by elected and party officials. Moreover, local cross-party alliances have been formed in various places. Considering the general societal trend toward classical political involvement at the regional and local levels, and the obvious fact that the Left Party cannot realize its claim to being a societally rooted party with universal presence in either the eastern or western German states, this is of particular significance.

In view of the renewed political activity of the so-called “‘68 generation,” these people, too, along with future generations, must be seen as an important potential for active citizens’ involvement, and must also be addressed by the Left Party. For this purpose, however, the Party will have to further work on the programmatic approaches initiated in 2011, that is, reformulating the issues of justice, democracy, socio-ecological reconstruction, and the struggle for freedom under the conditions of the twenty-first century.

What does that mean concretely? Until 2009 the concept of social justice was strongly linked to the struggle against the neoliberal labor market measures of the early 2000s. However, in the context of the European crisis, especially in the southern countries of the EU, these laws have been successfully reinterpreted by the parties of the grand coalition as part of Germany's success story. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to mobilize people to demand their abolition. Moreover, there have also been successes. The minimum wage demanded by the Left Party has been legally adopted by the grand coalition, albeit in a somewhat perforated form. The discussion on the introduction of flexible entry into pension status has taken up some of the points of criticism raised by the Left Party under the slogan, "No extension of working life!"

Moreover, the bulk of the younger generation, in Germany as elsewhere, is growing up in the context of almost taken-for-granted conditions of precarious work and lifestyles. That means that the demand to defend the welfare state is increasingly coming up against generations who see it as ever less worthy of being defended. Rather they see a state that promotes the polarization of society, and the equivalency of conditions of life prescribed by the Constitution to an ever lesser degree. Concretely facing these issues and linking them to the social and democratic issue of the struggle around public goods is one of the fundamental challenges facing the Left Party. Thus, in its position paper of August 2014, the Party formulated seven key points of its strategic orientation: First, a redistribution of societal wealth; second, the expansion of public utilities services and the public infrastructure; third, no exclusion of people through precarious working and living conditions, and support for social security and self-determination; fourth, the development of democracy and the dismantling of the secret services (integration of the struggle against terror into the police); fifth, a new model of economic development for justice and socio-ecological reconstruction; sixth, a solidarity-based system of European integration; and seventh, a new multilateral conflict-resolution mechanism and an end to arms exports. [4] The problematic potential, especially of the last demand, has been shown by the debates within the Left Party around the use of weapons in the struggle against the Islamic State group. The Party nonetheless stands by its core demand: no foreign missions of the German army! Against the background of the end of the "politics of (military) restraint" of the German government, the task of the Left Party is to develop and renew its strategies for peace.

For the implementation of these programmatic goals, learning from and using experiences from the state level is particularly important. Thus in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia in 2014, the Left Party was concerned not only with the concrete particular demands and their financial underpinnings, but also with the regional and transgenerational design of democratically inclusive societies, which are to avoid excluding anyone from social, democratic, or political participation. These goals are to be fleshed out for particular regions and concrete policy areas, taking into account the accelerating demographic changes of an aging society. At issue is the right to equivalent conditions of life for all in each region of these states, with the goal to secure an infrastructure that permits transport, hospitals, and physicians' offices close to the citizens, as well as mobile facilities, schools in all localities, free child care centers, and free lunches regardless of income. Some of these demands can be seen in the exploratory talks in Thuringia around the formation of a "red-red-green" government in that state. In light of these results, it would be desirable if the Left Party could, 25 years after the fall of the Wall, make Bodo Ramelow the first Left Party premiere of a state.

But we will have to see whether this can really bring about a policy shift that will make a recognizable difference in Thuringia, compared with other state governments. [5]

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[1] Left Party, "Programme of the DIE LINKE Party: <http://en.die-linke.de/die-linke/do...>

[2] Left Party

[3] For more on the position and development of the Left Party between the 2009 and 2013 elections, see the author's "An Inside Look at "DIE LINKE"" (October 2012):
<http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/germanys...>

[4] DIE LINKE: Motor für eine soziale und ökologische Gerechtigkeitswende [The Left Party: The Engine of the Turn toward Social and Ecological Justice]," Position paper of August 25, 2014 (German only), (accessed 8/26/14) [Given link does not work]

[5] For electoral political analysis of the left at the European level, see Hildebrandt and Daiber, eds., "The Left in Europe: Political Parties and Party Alliances between Norway and Turkey"(2009); and Daiber, Hildebrandt, and Striethorst, eds., "From Revolution to Coalition: Radical Left Parties in Europe" (2011).