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Germany

A bitter victory

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With the superficial categories dear to political analysts, it has been concluded that the electoral victory of the SPD/Green coalition government in the German federal elections of September 22, 2002 marks a 'turning point' in Europe. Indeed, the general tendency has been towards the installation of conservative/liberal governments, sometimes including populist right wing parties, to the detriment of social democracy and its political satellites.

Are we now to witness the revenge of social-liberal reformism? Nothing could be less certain. In fact, the SPD was the big loser at the federal elections of September 22, 2002. In comparison with 1998, it lost nearly 1.7 million votes and 2.4 percentage points. We were, then, correct to stress before the elections that the neo-liberal policies of the SPD and Greens had prepared the victory of the traditional bourgeois parties by disorientating and discouraging the wage earners and the excluded.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/25_schroder.jpg]

Schröder

If the defeat that had seemed very probable was finally avoided, it is because of certain unforeseen circumstances and a rhetorical turn on the part of the Schröder leadership of the SPD only some weeks before the date of the elections. The flooding that hit Germany just prior to the elections offered Schröder the possibility of presenting himself as 'manager' of the immediate human consequences of the catastrophe (with a certain appeal to East-West national unity) and adopt a new tonality, stressing the ecological reasons for the catastrophe and the responsibility of 'industry', even if in practical terms no real changes were proposed in terms of responsible production or making the employers pay.

In the same way, Schröder's statement that Germany would not participate in the war threatened by the US and Britain against Iraq reflected the feelings of a majority of the German population. Even if Germany in reality behaves as an ally of the USA (in terms of military logistics, the stationing of specialized troops in the Middle East and so on) and continues to build a Bundeswehr capable of interventionist initiatives, the public controversy with the Bush government quickly proved popular. It should be said that this did not directly benefit the SPD, but rather its coalition partners, the Greens. The reason is that the hope of promoting a more responsible long-term policy in the area of ecology is above all associated with them rather than the SPD. The same goes for the need for a more independent policy in relation to the US administration. Even if the Greens have in no way conserved a pacifist or anti-militarist identity, it is precisely their combination of a certain critical spirit and the 'responsible moderation' which corresponds to the level of consciousness of a stable electorate which also identifies with certain political-cultural advances - modest as they might be - resulting from the pressure exerted by the Greens on the SPD (notably in the area of gay 'partnership'). On the other hand, a 'middle class progressive' stratum can identify itself still more with the Greens, since the latter are often to the right of the SPD on the question of the social conquests of employees and deregulation, which is portrayed as 'anti-bureaucratic'. It was then the gains registered by the Greens - they scored 8.6% of the votes (against 6.7% in 1998) - which saved the governing coalition.

The 'Möller affair'

The liberals of the FDP, however, who were the projected coalition partners of the Christian Democrats, scored less than expected, increasing their vote slightly from 6.2 to 7.4%. Their 'project 18' (to score 18% of the votes) proved completely illusory. Their political line, combining a ferocious neo-liberalism with a superficial and often somewhat tasteless humour, verging on the populist demagoguery of the right. What confused and continues to confuse people in

Germany was the 'Möller affair' - Jürgen Möller was the FDP leader enjoying the highest media profile. Since this affair is complicated and replete with uncomfortable consequences for the small anti-capitalist left in Germany, we should dwell on it a little. [1] Möller, a long time lobbyist for German business interests in the Arab world, has always had a minority standpoint on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the bourgeoisie and the German political class. With the recent escalation of the conflict - while attacking Sharon, not incorrectly, as a warmonger - he entered into a polemic with the representatives of the leadership of German Jewry, who traditionally defend the Israeli viewpoint. In the framework of this polemic, he touched on anti-Semitic prejudices that are deeply rooted in German society (while being officially taboo, of course), accusing representatives of the Jewish community in Germany, like Michael Friedmann, of being themselves responsible for anti-Semitic feelings because of their 'arrogant and spiteful' attitude. This led to a counter-campaign uniting nearly all the German political class and largely penetrating the milieu of the radical left, isolating Möller (who, persevering in his attitude, has lost his post as vice-president of the FDP) and denouncing the FDP leadership as wishing to transform the party into a right wing populist force in the style of the Austrian Jörg Haider (not to mention a certain other Austrian - as Winfried Wolf has pointed out, the meaning of 'project 18' can be explained by the fact that the letters A and H in the German alphabet are the first and eighth letters, giving thus the initials of Adolf Hitler!).

Obviously in Germany anti-capitalist forces should react strongly every time that the demons of modern anti-Semitism agitate publicly. On the other hand the tendency to assimilate any critique of Zionism and above all any challenge to the bases of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism are not only an obstacle to solidarity with the Palestinian people, but also to mobilizations against the coming war with Iraq. In the milieu likely to support such actions (for example around ATTAC) any proposals for mobilization raise debates on the dangers of 'anti-Americanism', which is quickly associated with anti-Semitism, above all if the interests of Israel are at stake. For example the fact that in Britain the second slogan of the big anti-war demonstration was 'Freedom for Palestine!' or that the revolutionary Marxist film director Ken Loach publicly asks why we talk about Saddam Hussein's so-called nuclear weapons without mentioning Israel's nuclear arsenal, has led to some somewhat frosty commentaries in German anti-capitalist left milieu (in the daily newspaper 'Junge Welt' for example): such an approach would not be imaginable (or acceptable) in Germany.

Importance of economy

It was the results of the two small partners of the two big parties (SPD and CDU/CSU) which finally decided the result. Angela Klein, writing in 'SoZ' immediately after the elections, stressed the importance of the themes of the economy and employment for the political choices made by the electorate. It was the main theme of Stoiber's candidacy for the CDU/CSU, who tried to exploit the government's poor record in this area, above all in comparison with Schröder's promises four years ago ('Judge me on the fight against unemployment and I guarantee to reduce unemployment by one million'). 'In the domain of economic crisis and unemployment', wrote Angela Klein 'the governing left has nothing to offer, that is the bitterest lesson to draw from the election results.' The SPD/Green projects to combat unemployment are essentially directed against the unemployed and excluded, and their concepts of fighting the crisis are likely to deepen it and worsen inequality - we will come back on this point.

The most politically significant mobilization of the weeks preceding the elections. A demonstration on September 14, co-organized by five youth organizations of trade unions in the DGB (including those of the engineering union IG Metall and the services union Ver.Di) and by ATTAC. This attracted 40,000 people to Cologne - the majority were young trades unionists - under the rather general slogan of 'we want the good life!' A small split in the union apparatus was at the origin of this initiative - in spring 2002 a part of the union leaderships began to criticize the Schröder government for its disappointing social policies and on privatization. For the first time ever, there was speculation that the DGB unions were perhaps not going to campaign for the SPD and would begin to cooperate with ATTAC and the new social movements critical of neo-liberal globalization.

The SPD leadership reacted quickly and made a number of symbolic corrections to its electoral platform, bringing out a little more its social-democratic character; concerned for the interests of the workers and less well off. Posters were printed showing Schröder, with a grave expression, signing a document, with the subtitle: 'A modern politics means concern for social justice.' Immediately, the union leaderships swung back behind the SPD campaign. The September 14 demonstration was in a way a residue of the little split mentioned. In terms of content it articulated a fairly clear critique of the anti-social policies and policies of privatization supported by all the established parties, above all in health, as well as opposition to warlike adventures.

The leaderships of the union youth organizations even let it be understood in a prudent way that the positions of the PDS were closer to the union's demands than those of other parties, including the SPD. However, we should stress the very clear limits of September 14. After the demonstration - where the people mobilized by ATTAC and the small anti-capitalist left and those mobilized by the union youth organizations marched separately and heard different speeches - there was a big open air concert which was the obvious priority for the trade union youth, refreshed by the local regional beer ('Kölsch'). Few among them came near the stands of the organizations of the revolutionary left, bought their newspapers, or took their leaflets. So we should not exaggerate the promising aspect of this event in quantitative or qualitative terms - it is at most a young plant that merits careful cultivation.

Attacks on health and the unemployed

Christophe Jünke, writing in 'SoZ', emphasized the relative character of the negative political-cultural aspects of the electoral campaigns, personalization and the role of the media. 'The televised debates between the candidates for chancellor, Stoiber and Schröder ... do not aim to win new voters, but mobilize the respective traditional electorates.' For Jünke (and also for Angela Klein), it is not the aspect of 'demagogy and manipulation' which matters, but rather seizing the new tonality to mobilize the hopes and expectations - however modest - that can be harnessed: 'After 1998, this is a second mandate for a change of direction towards left social-liberalism and away from liberal conservatism in the area of social policy, and also a mandate against German participation in the coming war against Iraq.' The SPD has seen a visible erosion of its traditional vote, and Jünke shows that this process will continue if the SPD in government continues its policies of recent years and implements neo-liberal and antisocial measures.

In the area of health, the new SPD/Green government wants to implement the concepts of the Hartz commission to 'fight more effectively against unemployment'. Hartz, director of personnel at Volkswagen, is the head of a commission that has elaborated 'original' concepts of fighting mass unemployment, which were immediately adopted by the SPD leadership as a sort of 'miracle solution'. Now, it is determined to apply them. The essence involves increasing pressure on the unemployed to accept any kind of work at any kind of wage under the ultimate threat of total disqualification from benefit.

These projects have the particularity of combining continuity in the policy of social austerity with increased public indebtedness; thus the public deficit will very quickly pass beyond the Maastrichtian norm of 3% laid down by the EU under German pressure! For fear of the predictable reactions from different lobbies, the SPD and Greens will neither make the rich pay nor meaningfully increase indirect taxes (above all there will be no increase in VAT). It adds up to a series of half measures, and this in a full recession. This policy, then, continues to pile up economic, social and moral contradictions that could explode in bigger mobilizations than we saw on September 14.

A left to build

But the 'subjective factor' in Germany is weak in a number of ways, First - it is hard to imagine, but nonetheless true -

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the union leaderships are not opposing Hartz's ideas, on the contrary they are adopting them and claiming there is something positive about them if some nuances are introduced. This argument is absolutely Jesuitical and can only disorientate the trade union rank and file.

Moreover, the movement of the unemployed, which is opposed completely to Hartz's plans, remains a dynamic minority movement, much more limited than in it was in the last year of the Kohl government. In terms of a political alternative, the PDS, with 4% of the vote and the loss of its Bundestag grouping, has been weakened. It is not at all certain that it can make up for its losses in points of institutional support and thus its media impact by its recent (limited and contradictory) opening to the extra-parliamentary movements and to radical reformist and anti-capitalist positions. Angela Klein, in the article mentioned above, quotes an analysis appearing in 'Neues Deutschland' (a daily newspaper close to the PDS) of September 25: 'The PDS lost votes firstly where it had been most strongly implanted, in the municipal centres and the small towns of the former GDR. This is true for the constituencies of Halle, Magdeburg and Altmark as well as for Bad Dobran-Güstrow, Schwerin and Rostock. This is also the case where the PDS is in opposition, in Chemnitz, Jena-Weimar, Dresden, Gera, Gotha, Potsdam and Erfurt.

The PDS is losing, then, inside the hard core of its electorate. It is primarily the milieus of the old layer of public employees, their offspring and those around them who are beginning to turn away from the PDS. The milieu of the party 'of succession' [2] is shrinking then, and probably definitively. The PDS has not been able to attract new layers supporting a left politics on a lasting basis. It was a long goodbye to the concept of the party of 'succession', but now its end seems inevitable.'

Angela Klein argues that the PDS should consciously organize this 'goodbye' and seek a new social base distanced from those layers for whom the State is at the centre of their concerns. This will be a long and difficult process, she says, and the anti-capitalist left outside the PDS faces a similar task. But it is also intimately linked to a change of political direction, a clean break with the 'coalitionist' logic of participation in political power in the framework of acceptance of the capitalist system and the 'vocation' of loyally administering its crisis.

There remain the anti-capitalist forces in and outside the PDS, and inside that the revolutionary Marxist forces. They are weak and divided. The strengths and weakness of their various factions seem sometimes to be complementary: some capable of maintaining a small militant and propagandist milieu through all circumstances, others developing a spirit of initiative and a political influence which is sometimes much superior to the extreme modesty of their real forces.

In these conditions, the double battle to build an independent current, participate in the social movements and win new sympathizers and members, on the one hand, while participating in the development of a trade union left and influencing the evolution of the PDS left, on the other, will be a hard one. However weak, these forces are the only ones with the potentiality to 'make the ossified conditions dance by singing them their own melody' as Marx put it. The world revolutionary Marxist movement and more specifically the Fourth International should not ignore their weak forces in Germany - neither their difficulties nor their potential - for their development could change the relationship of political forces in Europe.

[1] The political reaction to the Möllemann affair was the subject of lively controversy in the pages of 'SoZ' - I present here my personal opinion.

[2] The PDS was the de facto successor in the East to the SED, the party in power in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) until 1990, with all that this implies in terms of political-social weight and bureaucratic continuity, although at its foundation it also expressed a desire for a 'rupture' with the Stalinist past and 'refoundation' of a new political force based on the traditions of the left.