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Germany

# Inside Die Linke

- Features -

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**After geopolitical upheaval and a snap election in February brought a new coalition to power, the political situation in Germany is rapidly changing. Even as the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is on the rise, Germany's left-wing party, Die Linke surged in the most recent election to over double its prior size. Tempest's Sean Larson sat down with Frieda Holm and Maria Sommer of the revolutionary socialist group marx21 to discuss the shifting dynamics within Die Linke, navigating the pitfalls of parliament, and building durable infrastructure for the class struggle within and beyond the party.**

**Sean Larson:** Until recently, Die Linke appeared to be in decline. What led to Die Linke's revival not just as a voting organization, but as a political party with now over 100,000 members? And what is the current situation within the party, months after the election?

**Frieda Holm:** After a period of stagnation, there was a long, existential debate within Die Linke around the question of Sarah Wagenknecht, which culminated in Wagenknecht's departure in the fall of 2023. After Wagenknecht left the party, we saw the first wave of people join Die Linke, even long-standing activists, who said that they felt that now after Wagenknecht and her racist politics were gone, now we can fight for Die Linke.

From there, a strategic process began. As a result of that, Die Linke launched a participatory offensive, conducted through the strengthened local structures, with a goal of aligning Die Linke's program with the main concerns people had. Our compass was: The party will not pull itself out of the crisis using its own resources. It needs new, motivated people with their own ideas. The party must open up by making a concrete offer to people to join in. It was the largest organizing campaign in the history of the party, attempting to build a model of Die Linke that relies on local activity, goes into the neighborhoods, and derives its priorities and platform from talking to people. This was the background when the snap elections were called.

During the federal election campaign, all parties other than Die Linke incited hatred against refugees, demanded tougher migration policies, border closures, and so on. Last year there was already a huge wave of protests against the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and their deportation plans. Previously, the Greens benefited from those protests, but now the Greens were part of the same dynamic and ultimately wanted to govern with the mainstream party of the right, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which meant that space was opened up for Die Linke to lead as a consistent force on anti-fascism.

So there was a subjective factor of strategic development in the party in terms of structures and the new profile, and also the dominant debates of the moment, both of which came together for the relative success of Die Linke in the elections.

The question remains, however, about whether this can lead to a different party that is sustainable in the medium or long-term. Die Linke's slogan during the elections was "everyone wants to govern, we want change." The party framed politics as above versus below, and emphasized a class-political approach. And the question is, can we continue to maintain the clarity of making politics for and with the people down here against those up there?

Or do we risk adapting to the very image of dominant politics that people on their doorsteps and in this campaign have often expressly rejected. They're actually fed up with politics now because it's being made from above and, ultimately, is not for them. So it's a question of how to make the innovations and political direction of the last year and a half sustainable.

**Maria Sommer:** Die Linke now has 10 percent in the current polls, and we are gaining more support. At the same time, there are a lot of people projecting onto Die Linke that it's supposed to become this new force beyond social democracy. There is pressure from within and outside the party, including from the liberal Green milieu, for Die Linke to assume responsibility for the larger left-liberal milieu now, including in foreign policy. Basically they want Die Linke to drop the "outdated" peace policy and become the standard bearer for the larger oppositional milieu.

All of this means that we are operating not only as an opposition force, but are also dealing with expectations from those who see a Left-Green-liberal government project as the only opposition to the right. That's why it's going to be a big challenge to say: "let's stick to the recipe for success, underdog politics, meaning us at the bottom against the top, we don't want to govern, we want to change, we build power from below," and so on. The question of government is very appealing, especially in times of setbacks and crises. We should also not suggest that we on the Left never want to take power. But we must not make the mistake of suggesting that we can take shortcuts. From that perspective, fighting for the direction of the party will be a challenge.

Then there is the question of the new members and how we can integrate them. We've now gained 60,000 new members within four months—it's a re-foundation of Die Linke, simply put. And the question is, can they establish a new ethos within the party? If so, then we'll manage to remain anti-establishment and build a grassroots membership party capable of running big campaigns like expropriating landlords. But it's really a question of strength, and whether people can integrate these new people into the big debate that is about to come.

I would say there are a lot of people who want to develop a new party. But of course there are still various theories of change and concepts of socialism. In any case, there is a new common course that puts class politics at the forefront and wants to make politics for the class. But this also conceals differences. Basically, a central difference remains between socialism from above and below. For us, this means strengthening the few approaches and projects that rely on genuine participation from below. Just as the doorstep campaign was essentially designed to do.

**SL:** Part of the trap for Die Linke and many other left-wing mass parties in Europe is voters' expectation that they would enter government to fulfill their promises. However, once in government, they are pressured to play by the rules and implement austerity measures, deportations, etc. What opportunities does Die Linke have to be a force in society when the party is not in power?

**FH:** It's an interesting moment, because I would estimate that a large proportion of the new members in Die Linke aren't actually joining to be part of a party that is just like any other party, just a little bit more focused on social justice. Instead, they have joined above all with an understanding that we do politics differently, we anchor ourselves in the neighborhoods, we do politics not for, but with the people. They are totally attracted to that, which corresponds to a strategy of building power from below and is actually very close to what we in marx21 would propose. And at the same time, the vision is not spelled out in detail, in contrast to others who simply say, "we are looking for progressive majorities in a governing coalition." So the central question is: What is our plan to win with the course of a radical, rebellious social opposition? What other path to change can we show – and prove in practice?

We are at the very beginning of demonstrating what an alternative to typical governing could look like, by building power and an ability to push through things from below. A lot of it will be determined by how we conduct campaigns and struggles going forward.

When you think about other left-reformist projects like Sanders or Corbyn, these were more focused on mobilization for elections or as an end in itself. We are trying to use campaigns to actually build the Left. Maybe it's useful to give a concrete example here, namely with the heating costs campaign.

When you think about other left-reformist projects like Sanders or Corbyn, these were more focused on mobilization for elections or as an end in itself. We are trying to use campaigns to actually build the Left.

During the election we had a strategy of having door-to-door conversations, but we wanted to use that opportunity to experiment with organizing neighbors and tenants, and actually make a concrete difference for people as Die Linke. In Germany there is a legal trick whereby if landlords bill their heating costs incorrectly or via the wrong system, tenants can claim back 15 percent of their costs, but few tenants know that. A lot of people we were talking to at the doors talked about high rents and prices, and that was a chance for us to say basically, you can get 150 euros back from your landlord, who most people hate anyway. We then helped people to actually do it as Die Linke. They would send their bill to Die Linke offices, we would check it, and then get tenants everything they need to send the letter to their landlord and get their money back.

Then it scaled up. In a few places, including Berlin, we came across cases where entire blocks were affected. We organized a tenants' meeting to inform people so they could take action in their buildings. Then people would get in touch and say "I can talk to my neighbors about it," etc. In this way we moved from door-to-door conversations toward supporting people fighting back and gaining experience in political activity. It's so low-threshold, but at the same time it makes an immediate difference for people, where they realize, hey, I can do something.

We now plan to continue this sort of campaigning post-election, and we have a few anchor points for Die Linke's extra-parliamentary work that emerged from the election campaign. Through those, we can then ask questions like: what are the radical reforms for which we want to build a mass movement in the coming years?

There is enormous potential to demonstrate what this alternative kind of politics looks like with the rent issue, where things are really coming to a head. The questions become concrete around whether Die Linke—as an opposition—can push through something like a rent cap or a municipalization, by organizing tenants, a second referendum, and mass mobilizations. If Die Linke can become an organic, driving force of a social movement that then leads to the government having to make concessions, it will succeed in organizing effective resistance against the austerity policies of Merz's coalition.

These are the things that will determine what comes of all these new people coming into the party with a lot of hope. Our ability to effectively spell out this political approach will determine if the influx of new members will contribute to building power from the bottom up.

**SL:** Can you describe the structures and tendencies within Die Linke, how they developed and where they are now? What forces exist that could play a role in shifting the party in new directions?

**MS:** When the party was founded, you basically had people from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in the East (the successor to the former ruling party in East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED)), coming together with the trade union Left in the West, plus a kind of radical, anti-capitalist left current, and that was the makeup of Die Linke then. The PDS especially had a theory of change based on proxy politics, or politics from above. The party model that came out of that founding moment was not at all geared towards being a membership-based, socialist party.

This constellation basically no longer exists, the PDS is no longer as strong, and there is a new opportunity. What's interesting now is that debates are proceeding—including in the party apparatus—in which we could actually make such a thing happen in the coming period.

**FH:** In principle, the political tendencies that have dominated the debates within the party for a long time still exist. They have been partially mixed together or scrambled, but I would say none of these tendencies has a footing in a significant part of the party's base.

With the Movement Left—a kind of caucus or organized tendency with Die Linke—it's a bit different from other tendencies insofar as it's not a completely decoupled space where programmatic questions are discussed with no relation to grassroots activity. But even with the Movement Left, it's not like there are thirty Movement Left district associations or something that pursue a specific political model. So because of this context, specific examples take on importance by showing new ways of doing politics, such as the election campaign of Nam Duy Nguyen in Leipzig, in which a direct mandate seat was won by a person of color for the first time in the East, or Ferat Koçak in Neukölln. Both of those were done in a mass participatory way, from below.

Yes, we in marx21 played a role in both, but it's a project of the left wing of Die Linke in a more expansive sense. It's not as if one tendency or we ourselves as actors did it alone, but rather they came from strongholds of the party (Leipzig, Neukölln), which we tried to use as "lighthouse" models for how this politics-from-below approach could work.

That's actually what I would say had the strongest impact on new members everywhere. The strategy of speaking to people at 100,000 doors during the national elections in order to set Die Linke's priorities was modelled directly on the Leipzig success. People saw what happened in Leipzig and wanted to do it, and then Neukölln came along and proved it could be done on a much larger scale. Such concrete successes have the most potential to change things and that's why we focused so much on creating such models or examples, to prove that it can work.

That brings us to these structural questions. If you look at the structure of Die Linke, including the constitution and the entire form, everything is conceptualized exclusively through party conferences and executive boards and elections for party conferences and so on. That is, the basic function of a grassroots member is to regularly attend events to elect delegates, program points, motions, or candidates. That's all. Of course, you're encouraged to be active somehow and wave the flag to make the party visible locally or something like that, but the overall political model is the same. Ultimately, you're only working for parliament, the platform, and the elections.

Of the 110,000 members of Die Linke, 109,000 are not in any parliaments, but those are the members who must become the source of our power. That means we need co-determination, we need delegates who can decide on the practical direction of the party...All of this raises the question of the organizational model.

Now it has become interesting, because the party leaders themselves say that Die Linke should become a membership-based socialist party, or what has become almost synonymous, a party that organizes the class. But the question is what does that actually look like? Of the 110,000 members of Die Linke, 109,000 are not in any parliaments, but those are the members who must become the source of our power. That means we need co-determination, we need delegates who can decide on the practical direction of the party, we need the capacity to unite around a common plan. All of this raises the question of the organizational model.

I think there's a chance to create something in this structure that encourages member self-empowerment rather than limits what people can do with their party. Of course, that does not yet create a revolutionary force. But it is exciting, because a lot of the limitations we have encountered in the past—with the outsized role of the parliament, for example—come from the fact that all decision-making spaces are geared toward that kind of model, without counterweights built in. This is still a complicated question though, and we are discussing it in the party now.

**MS:** Technically, the elected leadership of the party is supposed to be the political leadership. But for a long time the parliamentary group determined Die Linke's direction because they had the most power. During the crisis, the apparatus actually came to be the political leadership, and it was completely at odds with the parliamentary group.

We, or the radical left in general, used to always think the structural question and our relationship to the structures was basically apolitical. But now we have to confront this question of how to develop new party structures that allow for more democratization. There is a new opportunity to promote a perspective of socialism from below through a

new party model, with term limits, salary caps for parliamentarians, etc. I think that's common sense for about 70 percent of the party right now.

That's definitely cool, but the other question is, at what point does it actually make sense to set out to lead and build a revolutionary party? My feeling is that we're always doing this balancing act, so to speak. I don't think we should put that forward as the goal for Die Linke itself, because then there will always be the question of whether our actions are to be trusted. At the same time, I feel that for a revolutionary party to assume a historical role, the working class must be stronger. In Germany, it's only strong in certain areas. I believe we actually need to reach a different point in the class struggle in order to talk about this question of the revolutionary party properly.

What we are doing now in Die Linke is everything we can to strengthen the working-class struggle and improve the balance of power, while being careful not to discipline it. That's how I see our function in the party. There's a risk there of tipping over, but right now things are heading in a good direction and that is really helping us.

**SL: On that note, historically, the unions in Germany were more closely associated with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). What does the situation look like now with Die Linke and the unions, and also non-unionized workers? What plans or prospects are there for building and deepening this party-class relationship?**

**FH:** Well, the situation is complicated. On the one hand, the SPD has now entered a coalition government with the CDU, and if the government now abandons the eight-hour day—one of the main achievements of the labor movement—like the CDU wants to, then there is a question of union stability, and whether they will need other allies beyond the SPD in order to not be completely exposed to the new austerity program, Agenda 2030.

On the other hand, Die Linke still doesn't have a strong foothold in workplaces, it doesn't have a workplace practice at all really. The party does have relations with union officials, and there are a lot of union secretaries or people who work in the union apparatus who are also in Die Linke. But there is neither a real network within the workplaces nor a serious relationship with key class conflicts such as the hospital movement.

There are emerging efforts at strike solidarity, however, with Die Linke members going to picket lines and raising funds. More promising, in the last year healthcare workers have come together and started the first network of nurses within the party and beyond it. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which is tied to Die Linke, also sponsors a huge annual conference for union renewal that attracts a lot of people. These are the kinds of things that I believe could be the first beacons for spelling out Die Linke's workplace practice more generally.

We are grappling with how to actually speak to workers in their own idiom, and how to create structures for workers so that they can be part of the party's work. Some of these things I think the Belgian Workers' Party has already figured out better. We are at an experimental level: small experiments, initial attempts. In strongholds where we as marx21 are more involved, there are also closer networks that are promising, such as Neukölln.

**SL: Could you describe the activist milieu in Germany a bit more? What does the constellation of forces organizing around antiracism, queer politics, feminism, climate and other issues look like, both inside and outside Die Linke?**

**MS:** To be honest, it is bleak. The climate movement in Germany is basically at a standstill. Ende Gelände and Fridays for Future—which used to be these huge, sustained movements—are very weak now and more or less inactive. They don't have a project right now. There was a brief upsurge at Tesla, but it was very small and essentially all the usual Left suspects. The same applies to feminist and queer contexts. Of course, there are

networks, but these don't currently amount to an actual social movement, I would say.

**FH:** The antifascist coalition which blockaded the AfD party conferences has now become a focal point for what was the radical wing of the climate movement. So that includes the anticapitalist group Interventionist Left, and many autonomists such as TOP (a Berlin-based group, Theorie.Organisation.Praxis), all the radical left groups that had long had the climate blockades as a project, once those became weaker, they came together again around antifascism.

At the same time, there has been a crisis of the broad social Left, and even more so of the radical Left, which has meant that Die Linke has now become a strong pole of attraction. I think it's more the case that Die Linke and the desperately needed organization it offers provides a kind of survival perspective for the movements, rather than a strategic power perspective. But the politics brought in from the movements on e.g. anti-fascism, even offensive anti-fascism, and on climate issues, has been crucial for setting the course of Die Linke and for the fact that Die Linke could be accepted. But it's not as if there is pressure on Die Linke from the outside.

**MS:** I should say, there has been one significant movement, the Palestine solidarity movement, which is very small in Germany, very marginalized, and that's the area that we have not managed to substantially help build.

**SL:** Yes, Die Linke has had a contradictory approach to the global Palestine solidarity movement. Could you say a bit about the current state of things regarding Palestine solidarity in Germany?

**MS:** The Middle East debate remains a challenge. At the last party conference in May, the party members decided by a narrow majority that from now on the Jerusalem definition of antisemitism should be the basis for the party's political actions. This decision is a step in the right direction. Many members are calling for clearer politics and a break with the *raison d'état* on behalf of the party. Especially in light of anti-antisemitism, i.e., the taking up of the antisemitism critique from the right, it is important that Die Linke has a clear understanding of when a statement is antisemitic and when it is not. For many, this is now a great help in being able to participate in pro-Palestinian activities without worrying about being defamed.

But many people are also dissatisfied with the decision. A day before the party conference, the party leadership issued a statement on Israel's right to exist. This has a lot to do with reputational concerns: For the right-wing Springer press, any form of criticism of Israel by Die Linke is worth a major story. But that's not all: of course, there are still members within the party who align themselves with the Antideutsch (anti-German) scene. However, Israel's war crimes and the recent years of post-colonial movements have also changed the forces within the party. The challenge now will be to strengthen practical initiatives so that solidarity with Palestine is not lost amidst power struggles.

We have different constellations on this between the U.S. and Germany, but I sometimes feel like in Germany, we act as if it's particularly difficult to show solidarity with Palestine. But I think it's just as difficult in the U.S., to be honest. So being in Germany is a poor excuse, that's how I feel. In any case we do have problems speaking about it within Die Linke. So much of the party has simply been blind on this issue.

We thought about why that could be, and it seems to us that most people actually know far too little about it. There isn't the long history of Palestine solidarity and education here. So they are simply not informed, and this politics of fear prevents education on the issue, even though most of the people coming from university got some kind of post-colonial education and are very open-minded to a more progressive stance of Die Linke toward Palestine. So we have started showing the No Other Land film, for example during the election campaign in Neukölln and Leipzig, with guests, and it has been well-received. It's a very humanistic introduction to the topic and therefore feasible for a

broad audience to go there and initiate debates.

But to be clear, all of this, against the backdrop of the genocide, everything in Germany is totally embarrassing.

**SL: Are there new opportunities for Die Linke and the Palestine solidarity movement after the election? Or what are their views on Palestine with these thousands of new members?**

**FH:** There are a few MPs who are more explicitly pro-Palestine on the issue, which has brought it more into the open, and some party leaders have also changed their tune, for example clearly naming the genocide and calling out repression against Palestine solidarity. One MP from Die Linke attended the first session of the new Bundestag wearing a kuffiyeh, which caused a huge scandal in the mainstream media. But this is a sideshow.

I don't want to mislead though, because when the headwinds come against Die Linke on this issue, it quickly changes. But unlike with weapons deliveries to Ukraine, things have shifted more toward Die Linke having a better position on this. A lot of people who have joined the party were politicized through the antiracist and anticolonial debates in recent years, and have developed a deep moral antiracism, and feel like it's wrong. These people are saying hey, we're against oppression and this is the example of that, why isn't Die Linke more clearly against it?

**SL: Are there still people in Die Linke calling the cops on pro-Palestine demonstrations?**

**MS:** Absolutely. But the question is: how do things get better? You have to organize it. If we don't start something, or if the Movement Left doesn't call for a demonstration, then nothing will happen. And then the new members will eventually learn that you don't say anything about Palestine as a leftist in Germany. That's what you are taught.

**SL: Could you say a little more about marx21? What representatives do you all have elected to various levels, and what role does parliamentary work play in your general political perspective?**

**FH:** We are currently around 460 people. It's growing very quickly. I'd say probably a third of us are active in Die Linke, so that is a strength. We have four elected representatives: three in the Bundestag and one in the Saxon state parliament.

We have discussed a lot in recent weeks about the role of revolutionary MPs. We believe in limiting one's own salary, limited terms of office, and regularly discussing one's policies with marx21, but also with local left-wing structures. There is a learning process underway, and we are trying to spell out what revolutionary work in parliament looks like in the current context, in concrete terms. So how much time do they spend in parliament, how much time do they spend outside, etc. The salary caps, term limits, etc. are essentially meant as protective mechanisms against simply drifting into parliament.

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Source: [Tempest](#).

But there is also an important function of being in parliament as a space to demonstrate the balance of power and be able to speak to the outside world. We want their work to actually benefit us, both in the class conflict and the organizing work going on outside parliament. In other words, to use the access to public relations, prominent people, and resources to advance the political development on the Left from the bottom up. That's how I would summarize it,



but what that actually means is very complicated. So do you specialize in a specific policy area in detail and become an expert, or do you just become a megaphone and give good speeches? It's not always clear what revolutionaries should do in all circumstances.

MS: A year ago, when everyone in the world was declaring Die Linke dead, there were basically a few people who were seriously thinking about what realistic potential there was for Die Linke, and what our contribution could be. We set out some parameters and guardrails, and then decided to try it. We thought what we need is to build some lighthouse models that can activate the grassroots and serve as the example for a nationwide campaign that is participatory.

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