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Germany

Die Linke success in North Rhine-Westphalia?

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV427 - August 2010 -

Publication date: Monday 2 August 2010

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The outcome of the regional elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) on 9 May 2010 was a political event of importance at the federal German and even European levels. This is the most populous state of Germany with over 13 million registered voters.

Three central aspects should be highlighted to take stock of these elections:

1. The conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) emerged with a considerable loss. Its coalition with the liberals of the FDP was beaten in NRW and at the federal level the black-yellow CDU-CSU-FDP coalition, i.e. the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel, lost its majority in the Bundesrat (the second chamber of parliament representing L ander), which will impose procedures for consultations and compromise for many important bills. Merkel's government is also under pressure, down to 40% of voting intentions in the opinion polls.

2 Abstentions have again increased. This is a deep and continuous political trend. At the federal elections in 2005, participation in NRW was still 63%, this time it was only 59.3% or 7,872,862. This means more than a half million people who still voted in 2005, have shunned the polls this time! This reflects an obvious crisis of legitimacy of parliamentary democratic institutions although this type of observation is still difficult to interpret. This is not simply an "anti-systemic" reflex; there is also resignation and depoliticisation. Extra-parliamentary mobilisations also remain weak.

3. The fact that the Die Linke (The Left) party crossed the 5% barrier and entered the NRW parliament, the Landtag in D usseldorf with 5.6%, or 434,846 votes, is undoubtedly positive. With a parliamentary fraction of 11 members, including 6 women, it is the most "left" regional section in Die Linke which has strengthened its weight in the publicly visible political debate inside the party. Of the 11 deputies, six are in the Antikapitalistische Linke (AKL - Anticapitalist left) current, of which two are also member of the ISL (international sozialistische linke_ - International Socialist Left, one of the two public factions of the German section of the Fourth International). The other five are members of the Sozialistische Linke (SL), a left reformist current (but which includes, for example, "Marx 21", a part of the IST international current, linked to the British SWP). There is therefore no member of the FDS (Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus), which groups the "co-governmentalist" majority in the party at the federal level. The federal leadership had nevertheless considered this a very important election and committed itself to the election campaign: big public meetings with Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi attracted thousands of participants. Die Linke is now present in the regional parliaments of 13 L ander out of 16.

The defeat of the Government parties

Obtaining 34.6% of the votes cast, the CDU lost 10 points in relation to 2005, which is enormous. The bulk of its losses went to the SPD (140,000), the Greens (90,000), or abstention (330,000), but also Die Linke attracted some of them (30,000). But the CDU also lost votes to the FDP (130,000) and the small parties (110,000), especially of the extreme right ("Pro NRW", racist and anti-Islamist, gained 1.4% and the NPD, which remained below 1%).

There are certainly specific regional aspects that partly explain this heavy defeat, linked to the main candidate of the CDU, outgoing Minister-President J rgen R ttgers. For some time he was called the "worker leader" by the media for demanding social improvements to the Hartz IV law. At the beginning of the election campaign, alluding to a "punishment vote" predicted by the polls against the federal government of Angela Merkel, he had declared: "the

punishment vote is me", wanting to make it clear that he would work to correct a little the social impact of his party's and the black-yellow federal government's policies.

But in the middle of the campaign, there were what the mass media call "gaffes". For example, it was revealed that the NRW CDU had offered Rüttger's presence to anyone who was able to pay 20,000 euros, and that of his ministers for 10,000 euros. While claiming that he did not know of this, Rüttgers appeared less as "the worker leader", but as a typical politician. sold and hired. Furthermore, during an electoral meeting, he turned on Romanian workers (to defend German jobs, of course): "In the morning, they come anytime to work, and then they do not know what to do." The racist German nationalist had thus broken through the shell of the respectable and allegedly social politician!

It must be said that the inclination of Rüttgers - who likes to give himself a respectable image and who it is said would like to become President of Germany - for a populist demagoguery without limits is well-known to those who have a little memory. During the so called "green card" policy (aimed at bringing a highly qualified workforce to Germany, especially in software and especially from India) followed by the SPD/Green government of Gerhard Schröder, Rüttgers, who was already the leader of the CDU in NRW, did not hesitate to put up posters with the slogan: "children, not Indians" (in German, this rhymes: "Kinder statt Inder").

However, the defeat of the CDU is probably due in the first place to the effect of the "punishment vote" against the conservative-liberal government of Angela Merkel. The case of Greece may have been a factor - but one should not overestimate this or see a nationalist-protectionist reflex on the part of the German people. Of course, everyone knows that the billions spent to save the failing banks as well as the new billions invested to counter the crisis of the euro means that employees and the excluded will pay the bill. Loss of confidence in Merkel and her policy is clearly visible. The policy of the so-called "debt brake" employed by her government plans already to "save" 10 billion euros per year by 2011... although neither big business, nor the Bundeswehr will suffer!

The Liberal FDP maintained its position with 6.7% of the vote, and even gained 0.5 points from the 2005 elections. Why then does everyone talk about its defeat? Because the result is compared to the federal election of 2009, when it received more than 14% of the vote, which was a triumph for its leader Guido Westerwelle. The main campaign slogan was "no more net, no more gross", the main promise being to significantly reduce taxes. In governmental practice that was not carried through, apart from a little bit at the beginning (inter alia with a tax break for hoteliers). And with the crisis of the euro, the line has been officially drawn by Merkel. The FDP therefore has gone back to being a small party with a modest and unstable electoral base. Its crisis is simultaneously a crisis of the "black-yellow" project.

False and true triumph of the SPD and the Greens

The triumph of Hannelore Kraft, the main candidate of the SPD in NRW, who with 5,000 votes less than the CDU got the same number of deputies, is very relative. In comparison with 2005, the SPD lost 2.6 percentage points (170,000 votes to the Greens, 70,000 to Die Linke, 50,000 to the small parties and 130,000 to abstention, which is not offset by 140,000 votes taken from the CDU and 10,000 from the FDP). The success of the SPD was above all the low scores of the CDU and the FDP. Its election campaign, in a clear verbal break with the SPD of the Schröder and Müntefering epoch, had a new, much more social (and a little greener) profile and some demands copied those of Die Linke.

Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (the Greens) really did score a triumph. With 12.1% of the vote, they gained 5.9 points compared to 2005! They took 170,000 votes from the SPD, 90,000 from the CDU, 30,000 from the FDP, and they were alone in being able to mobilise those who had abstained in 2005, or 80,000 votes! And they lost only 20,000 to Die Linke and a similar amount to the small parties, among other things, probably largely in favour of the "Pirates"

who scored 1.5%.

It would seem that there is an ascendant layer in the German population, which aspires to progressive politics in the cultural and moral field, wants a policy which takes environmental issues into account and at the same time a less harsh policy against the poor and excluded (in the campaign, a Grünen slogan was, for example, "No reductions for kids"), while remaining won to neo-liberal politics and therefore not wanting to penalize the Grünen for their anti-social policy (and warlike interventionism) under the so called "red-green" government of the infamous Gerhard Schröder (SPD).

There is also a certain inertia of political perception. In a recent opinion poll more than 60% of those questioned on their reasons for voting Greens believed that latter fought to decommission nuclear power stations... that is simply not true and hasn't been for a long time!

Die Linke, a success against winds and tides

In the NRW regional elections of May 2005, Linkspartei PDS and WASG (which have since formed Die Linke) were separate candidacies. With almost 73,000 votes Linkspartei PDS got 0.9%, while with 182,000 votes the WASG got 2.2%. Together the radical left had a total of 255,000, or 3.1% of the votes cast. Both in percentage and absolute figures (434,846) Die Linke (5.6%) therefore improved on its predecessors' score of five years ago. But if you compare its results with those of the federal elections 2009 - in NRW Die Linke then scored 790,000 voice - it is rather a setback. Why is the entry into the Düsseldorf Landtag with 5.6% nonetheless a genuine small victory?

After the adoption of its electoral program, Die Linke in NRW was subject to a true assault by the media and by leaders of other parties. Demands like the socialization of the energy sector or legalisation of "soft" drugs caused a scandal, its formal refusal to accept the reduction of social benefits, privatisation of public property, or loss of jobs in the public sector was presented as foolishly stubborn and dogmatic. Die Linke NRW was denounced as a "chaotic" party, which was "irresponsible", "unfit to govern", "incapable of being political", with leaders who were either still of the extreme left or had a "leftist" past.

The SPD and the Greens wanted to convince the electorate that it was pointless to vote for Die Linke, it was unnecessary to achieve a governmental alternative and that it was necessary to prevent Die Linke entering the Landtag. At the same time, this pressure sought the adaptation of Die Linke NRW, so that the party agreed to govern with the SPD and apply a policy of austerity in the interests of capital, like Die Linke in the Länder of Berlin and Brandenburg. For their part, the CDU and the FDP insinuated that the SPD and the Greens could achieve a coalition with Die Linke, if results permitted, which caused the SPD and the Greens to indulge in even stronger aggression against Die Linke. It should be noted that at the start of the electoral campaign the most influential representatives of the right wing of Die Linke, like Dietmar Bartsch, had denounced their party in NRW through public statements on the "lack of political maturity of leftists in Northern Rhineland-Westphalia" (the success of May 9 silenced this kind of voice, at least temporarily). It goes without saying that the SPD and the Greens have rejected initiatives and proposals from Die Linke for common extra-parliamentary mobilizations.

The fact that Die Linke had never been previously represented in the NRW Landtag also played a role. Polls, especially in the last weeks before the election, gave it a maximum of 6%, often less. In the electorate uncertainty as to the ability of Die Linke to cross the 5% barrier was thus maintained. Furthermore the composition of the Landtag, which does not have the powers of the Bundestag (Federal Parliament), mobilizes ordinary people less.

The negative effect for Die Linke strengthened as the election date approached. The SPD, which had a lot of ground

to make up after its resounding defeat in 2005, gained more and more in the polls and approached the CDU. In the last days before May 9 the media projected a "head to head race" between Jürgen Rüttgers of the CDU and Hannelore Kraft of the SPD. Probably this led some of those who had wanted to vote for Die Linke to finally give their votes to the SPD and the Greens. It is a phenomenon probably similar to that observed in the regional elections in France: the traditional "moderate left", and therefore social democracy, taking advantage of a right wing government while at the same time abstention grows. This is a difficult constellation for the political forces to the left of the left.

The SPD and the Greens have shown they can modify their rhetoric and capture hopes, though only very modest hopes: a less aggressive politics, a little more social, a little greener, a little more progressive. But the SPD has also managed to regain an important section of trade union leaders in the name of "solidarity" and traditional, personal relationships even if a minority of them begin to show a leaning for Die Linke. The "moderate left", which has done so much over so many years to kill any hope, is not yet dead... or at least it is still capable of returning from the dead.

Having said that, taking into account the context and knowing that the level of extra-parliamentary mobilisation remains very low, we can say that Die Linke NRW scored a real success swimming against the current.

The question of government and perspectives

Die Linke in NRW failed to mobilize the abstentionists. This is an obvious problem, especially when we know that the quite radical profile of its campaign was designed to do so: it focused on social justice, the withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan, demands that the rich pay for the crisis, explaining that while others want to govern, we want to change society, and so on. In the meetings and in the media, Die Linke said both that it would not prevent the overthrow of the black-yellow government of Jürgen Rüttgers, and that it was therefore ready to discuss with the SPD and the Grünen a possible 'red-green-red' coalition, and that it wanted a true change of policy in the interests of the vast majority of the population, the employees, the excluded, young people and women and eco-responsibility, conflict with the interests of big business. Die Linke said very clearly that it was certainly not ready to accept the questioning of social benefits and the destruction of jobs and opposed privatization.

Our comrade Wolfgang Zimmermann (a member of the AKL current), one of the two spokespersons of the party in NRW and now co-chair of its parliamentary fraction (with Bärbel Beuermann, a member of the SL current), had been perceived by the media during the election campaign as "realistic" on the question of a coalition with the SPD and the Greens. It was a very selective perception. Example: on March 20 in Essen, speaking to 7,000 people demonstrating under the slogan: "We don't pay for your crisis", Wolfgang Zimmermann had said: "We will probably be a small minority in the Landtag. But even if we had the majority to the Landtag, us alone, we could not change much. Because parliaments do not have power. It's capital which is in power. Against the power of capital, there is only one remedy: the counterweight of millions of people. I am ready to collaborate with the SPD and the Greens, but where are they? Why are they not here with us? Why hide in Parliament? Collaboration must begin in extra-parliamentary mobilizations."

The next day, in the newspapers and regional broadcasts, one could read and hear: "Wolfgang Zimmermann wants a coalition with the SPD and the Grünen". Which was not a total lie, but still a strange account of what Zimmermann had actually said!

The SPD and the Grünen repeated during the election campaign that Die Linke was incapable of real politics. A few days after the elections, whereas the FDP had rejected a red-green-yellow coalition (its condition to exclude any discussion with Die Linke had been disapproved by the SPD and the Grünen), the SPD and the Grünen invited Die Linke to prior consultation for possible negotiations on the possibilities of a joint coalition. The event took place on

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March 20 and lasted for five hours, after which the delegations of the SPD and the Greens declared publicly that Die Linke in NRW was not fit to behave in a responsible manner. Whose fault is that? It is a question that is now discussed in politicised circles.

For two hours, the SPD and the Grünen demanded a denunciation of the defunct GDR by Die Linke. The delegation of Die Linke in NRW accepted the formula of the "preamble of the contract of coalition in Brandenburg": "the GDR was not a democracy, but a dictatorship." But the SPD and the Greens wanted more: "the GDR was a Unrechtsstaat". What does this mean? When a term is untranslatable, we detect ideology. "Rechtsstaat" means a state of law. But its negation "Unrechtsstaat" does not mean that "this was not a state of law". It is a term which has been artificially created and launched by an ultra-conservative think-tank decades ago (the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, close to the CDU) in the service of crude anti-Communism. Its meaning is the "dictatorship like that of the Nazis, which has committed the worst crimes against humanity." This is the identification of "socialism" and "fascism" in the bourgeois theory of so-called "totalitarianism". The Die Linke delegation could not accept it.

For the third hour, the second theme was discussed: the Verfassungsschutz, the "comprehensive", secret spying service against the "enemies of the constitution", which among others spies on the Die Linke party in NRW! Die Linke demanded its dissolution in its program. Its delegation immediately declared: "We only represent 5.6%, we are ready to renounce any specific initiative in this direction in the course of the next five year term. We are ready to sign this in a possible coalition agreement". But the SPD and the Greens called for more: that Die Linke agree to vote for a special fund to strengthen the service. Here, Die Linke delegation did not follow, saying that we should rather think about reducing spending on the Verfassungsschutz.

It was only following these two discussions that the SPD and the Grünen came to the economic and social policy issues. They wanted to accept a beginning of privatization of the Land bank. They wanted to accept that 8,300 positions in public services were not renewed. They wanted to accept a so-called "budgetary consolidation" policy including incursions on certain social standards. The Die Linke delegation could not accept this: "we have stated otherwise in the election campaign... and you also! Hannelore Kraft of the SPD responded: "after elections, all programs should be subject to a realistic verification [Realitätscheck]!" The delegation from Die Linke replied: "We understand better and better why there are more and more abstentions. It is not responsible to do afterwards the opposite of what was promised before the election!" The discussion was ended. Now the SPD has initiated discussions with the CDU.

Many rank and file activists in the SPD and some Grünen are not happy with the way in which the leadership torpedoed consultations with Die Linke. The latter focuses now on the work of opposition, which they wish to link closely to the social movements and the combative trade unions. In case of a duel between Hannelore Kraft (SPD) and Jürgen Rüttgers or another candidate for the post of Minister-President of Land, Die Linke is ready in that situation to vote for Kraft. In the case of a minority Government of SPD and Grünen, with "changing majorities", Die Linke will decide in each case how to vote (SPD and the Grünen demand for example some progressive reforms in the area of nurseries, schools and universities). But Hannelore Kraft has already excluded publicly the possibility of a minority Government in the Landtag. It is necessary all the same to revive this proposal publicly to respond to the feelings of many working people in who are horrified by a broad black-red coalition or a provisional minority Government led by Jürgen Rüttgers.

Before the exploratory talks with the SPD and the Greens, Die Linke had organized three regional conferences (Rhine, Ruhr and Westphalia-Lippe) to prepare. On the following Sunday a regional Congress approved the conduct of the delegation of the party in the talks (a judgment also approved by the Federal Executive of the party).

In the event that the delegation would have signed a coalition contract, the following procedure was envisaged) three new consultative regional conferences to discuss it; b) an extraordinary regional congress to decide; c) a referendum

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allowing the nearly 9,000 members of the party to finally decide the matter, by approving or rejecting the decision of the congress. (it should be said in parentheses that during the exploratory interview, the SPD and the Greens had violently criticized this procedure together with the fact that the delegation of Die Linke included members of the party leadership and not only the leaders of the parliamentary fraction: "This is further proof that you are not reliable!" This shows the respect for rank and file democracy that characterizes the leaderships of the SPD and the Grünen).

The Die Linke party is far from having resolved its problems. We must try to make it a real party of struggle, rooted in the factories, services, universities, schools, neighbourhoods, in social movements, in the combative wing of the trade unions. But in NRW it is already a party that stands out from others because it is governed by its members and remains faithful to the interests - to employ our traditional terminology - of the working-class and all the exploited, oppressed and dispossessed.