

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2715>



Germany

What now for the radical left?

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV451 - August 2012 -

Publication date: Monday 13 August 2012

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The arrogance of German chancellor Angela Merkel reflects the self confidence of the dominant elite. The Bundeswehr, the army of German imperialism, is ready to intervene at any point of the globe. In ten years, the annual income of the richest has increased by 50%. And despite some scandals, the poles of résistance remain very circumscribed (the anti-nuclear movement, opposition to the new railway station in Stuttgart, actions against the neo-Nazis, “Blockupy” in Frankfurt); nothing seems really capable of disturbing the game of trade union co-management and the alternation of the traditional parties in the management of governmental affairs.

On July 12, the former CDU president of the Land of Bade-Wurttemberg was the subject of a prosecution for an illegal competition agreement during the sale of the regional electricity company to the French group EDF. Five months earlier, Germany's President, Christian Wulff, was forced to resign following a financial scandal: chosen for this honorary responsibility by the Bundestag's deputies from among supposedly exemplary personalities Wulff, who is soon to appear before the courts, claimed his pension of 199.000 Euros annually for life, for serving 20 months in office, while the age of retirement was raised to 67 and millions of people are surviving with Hartz IV or poverty wages.

Two examples among others of why a diffuse sentiment of defiance and dissatisfaction, indeed anger, remains widespread with respect to the “politicians”, which makes it possible to envisage a defeat of the coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP liberals in September 2013 and a return to government for the social liberals of the SPD and their satellite Die Grünen.

Conflict, defeat, concessions

On May 17-19, 2012, Frankfurt, the location of the European Central Bank, was the setting for three days of attempted occupation and various blockades which succeeded in closing down the banking area, while 5,000 police officers were in action on the pretext of ensuring the safety of property and persons. The Saturday demonstration attracted around 25,000 people from Germany, Italy and France. There was a good mobilisation by Attac Germany, a dynamic organisation, and around twenty groups from the post autonomist network “Interventionist Left”, which, while politically heterogeneous (among other things, in its relations with Die Linke), is recognised for its capacity to organise activist mobilisations like the blockade of the G8 summit in Heiligendamm in 2007 or initiatives around the transport of nuclear waste.

Such a demonstration in Frankfurt in the middle of a long week-end is not negligible. But the reality of the relationship of forces between the classes is seen in the definitive liquidation of the drugstore chain Schlecker, announced four days later by the official receiver. It is reflected by the closure of the 2,800 remaining stores and compulsory redundancy for 14,000 employees (mainly women). For some months the agony has gone on, with the political powers, the chancellor in particular, refusing to intervene and the trade union Ver.di soft pedalling so as not to frighten potential buyers. In refusing to mobilise the employees around any form of challenge to private ownership (expropriation, workers cooperative with public financial backing and so on), the union created the conditions for a heavy defeat.

The reality is also reflected in the probable closure of Opel in Bochum in 2016 (with the end of production of the Zafira), if not before. This is a factory of 3,300 workers, which General Motors has decided to close down, like others

in Europe, so as to restore its profits. While traditions of struggle are significant, the current leaders of the works council and of IG Metall have for the moment chosen to stress the qualities of the site, its capacity to develop a new model, its high production capacity and the cost of closure (a billion Euros).

The favourable position of German capital in the game of international competition allows concessions to workers to be made, however. The unions have just won wage increases that the finance minister Schäuble himself had called for (the agreement signed in late May for chemical workers envisaged a 4.5% increase for the coming 19 months, with an increased possibility of negotiating company by company), unemployment is falling, and the movement of the unemployed has disappeared from the scene. The powerful union bureaucracy has not complained about Merkel, contenting itself with the big traditional manoeuvres during the annual negotiations and obtaining "presentable" results.

The crisis in Die Linke

The Grünen (Greens) emerged and developed electorally during the anti-nuclear and pacifist mobilisations of the 1980s (before integrating themselves in record time). Die Linke captured the anger and revolt aroused by the brutality of the antisocial measures of Agenda 2010 imposed by an SPD-Green government, expressed in the "Monday demonstrations" of 2003-2004; in 2009 it won 76 seats in the Bundestag (out of 622), and in 2010 5.6% and 11 deputies in North Rhine-Westphalia, the most populous Land. Building an anchorage and implantation in the western Länder seemed a process that was well underway. But this cycle now seems closed.

The two recent electoral defeats have emphasised this (see "North Rhine-Westphalia: crucial regional election" by Manuel Kellner http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2584&var_recherche=kellner). The return to grace of the SPD/Greens and the emergence of the Pirate party, which reflects fuzzy discontent (thus favouring both free public transport and budget restrictions), have precipitated a crisis which was expressed fully at the national congress in Göttingen on June 2-3, 2012, five years after the creation of the party.

With the polls giving Die Linke barely more than half of the 11.9 % it won at the parliamentary elections of 2009 (the threshold for qualification is 5%), the debates took on a rare violence. Debate centred on the necessity of renewing the dual leadership, the objective being to choose a man and a woman, one from the east the other from the west. Oskar Lafontaine was ready to return, two years after his resignation for health reasons, if there was no candidate against him. But the "barons of the east" maintained the candidacy of Dietmar Bartsch, an apparatchik federal deputy and a "pragmatic" partisan of governmental agreements with the SPD.

This led to a conflict between the two men who embodied the success of Die Linke - Oskar Lafontaine, former president of the Land of Sarre, president of the SPD from 1990 to 1995, briefly Finance Minister under Schröder then resigning from the SPD in 2005, and Gregor Gysi, president of the PDS at its foundation in 1990 (Party of Democratic Socialism, successor of the party-state SED in the GDR), the president of the Bundestag group. The later violently challenged the representatives from the West: "I cannot accept all this arrogance with respect to Easterners. That reminds me of the arrogance of the West towards the East during reunification. Why cannot you recognise that we are a major political force in the East and only a small party in the West?" (see "L'Humanité", June 1, 2012). Klaus Ernst, outgoing co-president, spoke of "signs of disintegration" while numerous commentators evoked the risk of a split.

While Katja Kipping, from Dresden (from the "emancipator" current, a satellite of the "pragmatics") was elected, the opposition to Bartsch finally presented an unexpected candidacy which won by 297 votes to 251, that of Bernd Riexinger, aged 56, unknown to the general public but a respected figure of the trade union left, head of Ver.di in

Stuttgart and of the party in Baden-Württemberg, also involved in the Stuttgart 21 movement (which is opposed to the mega station).

A crisis of orientation

The “pragmatics” were not, finally, able to profit from the situation as much as they would have liked. The orientation of the party remains open. But we should not underestimate the fact that by virtue of the rules in force, the Eastern members are for now still under-represented. The real weight of the various “partisans of adaptation” like the Forum of Democratic Socialism (FDS), the municipal elected representatives, the mayors, the “Fraktionen” (a group of elected representatives which benefits from significant rights) in the communes, the “Kreise” (departments), the regions, their paid colleagues (at all levels), the apparatus of full-timers, have all taken on still more weight since the electoral defeat in NRW. This turn has moreover been followed by a loss of the radical left's majority at the regional federation congress at the end of June. In the resolution adopted, the passages which traced a clear line of divide with the institutional parties and the references to anti-capitalism have been suppressed, as has the explicit critique of the trade union leaderships; it is also stated that the SPD and Greens could be coalition partners. But meanwhile, both at the federal level and in most Länder, there is no space for a governmental alliance with the SPD, which has no need of burdening itself with a partner still presented as “extremist”, inasmuch as it is not forced to do so by the electoral arithmetic.

A new departure?

Without any significant movement of protest from below, without experiences of self-organisation which escape the control of the apparatuses, without class struggles of greater intensity, there will be no meaningful change in the relationship of forces. Even if it had the will, Die Linke does not have the ability to take the initiative of such movements (and unhappily the political currents to its left still less). The left currents of the party, especially Antikapitalistische Linke (AKL), try to persuade the party to make this objective its priority. They point to the new programme, which explicitly talks of Die Linke wishing to go beyond capitalism. The question of the concrete link between the strategic perspectives and the everyday struggles of resistance (for example for the “right to the city” against exorbitant rents and the lack of housing, against budget restrictions and their consequences on public services and so on) is still key. We will see it again in the debates around the preparation for the Bundestag elections of 2013.

The need is to transform a party whose rank and file structures are too often active only during electoral campaign into an organisation whose members are implanted in their places of work, study and habitation, and which proves its utility independently of electoral preoccupations. From this viewpoint, it should be recognised that there are also things to learn from the Eastern structures in terms of traditions and implantation. Die Linke must show in this electoral year that it can be a useful party which helps to organise resistance.

German revolutionaries have made very different choices of construction: most are in Die Linke, generally without illusions. A minority of small groups have opted for the thankless road of slow implantation in the workplaces and social movements, at the risk of making a priority of self-preservation.

The shared conviction that the road of transcending the current situation could prove rich in surprises necessitates favouring all opportunities for dialogue, confrontation, reflection and common actions. The objective, whatever the conjunctural choices, is the formation of an anti-capitalist pole which is significant and visible, present inside and outside Die Linke.

