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Germany

An upsurge of solidarity - Refugees, welcome! Something new in Germany...

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In recent weeks, the influx of refugees into Germany has generated a mass movement of welcome, support and solidarity. On the front page of German newspapers and in the German and international electronic media, we can see the new culture of "welcome". Hundreds of people gather in the railway stations in Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne and in many other cities. They applaud the refugees who arrive by train. They bring flowers, food and drink. They make cash donations. A large number of people volunteer to sort and distribute clothing, to care for the children, to give German classes and to render a thousand and one other services.

This is a process that is being expressed in the depths of society. Football clubs organize international teams made up of refugees and integrate them into leagues at different levels. Thousands of people outside the established structures of associations and political organizations come together spontaneously to organize aid to the refugees. They act shoulder to shoulder with members of anti-racist associations, with antifascists [1] and the radical left. Many young people - including many young migrants and those belonging to the "second generation" - "Euros" are engaged in a very concrete way in this solidarity movement, focused on practical assistance to the refugees.

In the programmes of the public television channels as well as in those of the big private channels, there are an increasing number of reports, debates and all kinds of programmes in favour of the refugees and of integration. And always, it is the enthusiasm for the integration of refugees that is most important. The exchanges revolve around a number of questions: how can we do even better to alleviate the plight of the refugees; how should we behave in order to live together with them; how could the German government impose, within the European Union (EU), the generalization of a generous welcome, immediate and effective assistance and integration of the refugees. "Refugees, welcome": this slogan, until further notice, has become dominant in the public debate in Germany.

There is a real contrast, a genuine contrast between the xenophobic and anti-Muslim protests of PEGIDA [2] and the wave of violent actions organized by neo-Nazis against the accommodation centres, as well as against immigrants. These mobilizations are too often supported by "angry citizens" (*Wutbürger*) who come with their whole family to shout their hatred. And then we hear threats to kill politicians who organize reception centres and accommodation for the refugees.

The movement today in reaction against this is also situated in opposition to what happened in the first half of the 1990s. Then, violent demonstrations and physical attacks against refugees from the war in Yugoslavia were carried out under cover of an official ideology that found its expression in the slogan, *Das Boot ist voll* ("the boat is full"), which led to a change in the German constitution in 1993. The right of asylum was then reduced to the strict minimum.

So there is at the present time an extreme polarization of attitudes in the German population. For the moment, it is the feelings of solidarity that are dominant. Imagine the Nazis, the supporters of the far right, those fired up by nationalist agitation, who see on their TV screens this "welcome" (*Willkommen*) multitude and the official ideology of the "culture of welcome" (*Willkommenskultur*)! This is supported by the employers' organizations, which insist on the opportunities for "the German economy" that are represented by hundreds of thousands of people who will sell their often well-qualified labour power (which is especially true for refugees from Syria).

Already, the refugees passing through Orbán's Hungary shout: "Germany! We want to go to Germany! We want mama Merkel!" And these refugees see the flowers that people give them in German railway stations; they hear

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the applause, they learn that Germany is collecting billions of euros to give a better welcome to refugees ... Come! Everyone come! There will be many more, since they are being showered with flowers and given billions of euros! This is a real nightmare for the Nazis, the nationalists, the "Western" preachers of racial hatred.

For Merkel's government and for her prestige, this is a considerable triumph. Yesterday, Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble were being represented in cartoons with Hitler's moustaches and the spiked helmets of the Wehrmacht for their ultra-harsh attitude against the people of Greece. Now they are celebrated as the embodiment of humanitarian and humanist principles, as a good example standing up "against the Hungarians, the Slovaks, the Danes and other brutes".

I am not one of those who like to spit in the soup to spoil the appetite of those who are eating. We should welcome the turn of "public opinion" in Germany today. This is a chance for the radical left, which can cooperate with all these people who are taking action on the basis of solidarity, and enter into a dialogue with them. However, we should make a sober analysis of what is happening.

In his budget statement, Schäuble has just combined billions of euros for the reception and integration of refugees with instructions to all ministries to cut their spending. This is the dogma of iron fiscal discipline, the cult of "zero deficit". This means that the policy of austerity will resume with a vengeance, which will lead to the backlash, the reaction. Once assistance to the refugees is associated with the worsening of the social situation of the poor and those on low incomes, feelings are likely to turn against it, possibly on a large scale.

To counter this will require the feelings of solidarity to be broadened out to social relations as a whole, demanding a fair distribution of wealth in order to reduce inequalities and demand the right to a decent life for all.

The German left is not quite up to the challenge. Admittedly, during the debate in the Bundestag (the Federal Parliament of Germany), Gregor Gysi (Die Linke) rightly raised the question of the causes of this forced exodus. And he established the relationship with the options of the dominant powers, which organize participation in wars of intervention and make the arms industry one of the main contributors to Germany's exports. Angela Merkel carefully avoided answering him directly.

But Gysi did not link the question of solidarity with the refugees with that of solidarity with the peoples who are crushed by dictatorships, or with class solidarity in the struggle against big business in Germany, whose concrete interests condemn a growing part of the population to a life that is increasingly distant from the ideal of the "German paradise" which attracts so many people who would like to take refuge here. Yet only a very small minority of them will succeed in doing so.

It must also be said that the left wing of the Die Linke and the German radical left as a whole is not well placed to answer the question of the reasons for the forced exodus, especially as regards Syria. Indeed, Sahra Wagenknecht, co-president of Die Linke's fraction in the Bundestag, managed to make a statement on the subject of refugees from Syria who have made up the majority of refugees in Germany since 2014 - without mentioning the dictatorship of Assad and the devastating war it is waging against its own population. But for them because of their "campism" - it is the United States, the European Union and "the West" as a whole that are responsible for the Syrian catastrophe.

This is not the way that the German radical left will be able to enter into dialogue with the Syrian refugees belonging to or sympathizing with the democratic opposition against the Assad regime. Especially since this radical left (with a few exceptions) has never been in solidarity with the Syrian revolution, which in its early days had nothing in common with the Islamic counter-revolution.

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Another important issue is that of differentiating between "good refugees" and "bad refugees". For example, refugees from Syria, even though they do not correspond to the restrictive criteria for the right of asylum in Germany since 1993, can expect to acquire the status of recognized refugees, because public opinion and official policy recognize the bloody and unbearable situation of war and terror in Syria as the reason for people "fleeing".

But refugees from the Balkans are described simply as refugees or rather as "economic" migrants (*Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge*) who are coming to Western Europe and Germany because they are "merely" poor. It is true that at present, in the German media, the situation of Roma who are discriminated against or Albanians threatened by blood revenge is often emphasized. But the official policy of the grand coalition government of Christian conservatives (CDU-CSU) and the SPD (Social Democrats) aims at defining their countries of origin as "safe" (*sichere Herkunftsländer*), the better to forcibly repatriate refugees from the countries in question.

To this we must answer that the "economic" or rather social reasons for the exodus are legitimate, in the same way as exile because of political repression or war and civil war. We live in a world that creates glaring inequalities and poverty for at least two billion people. Only by confronting this directly and integrating the refugees, and not by isolating itself by lethal borders and camouflaging itself in a fortress, can the working-class majority of the dominant industrialized countries have a chance to emancipate itself, to be free from exploitation and oppression.

This article was originally written for [Viento Sur](#)

[1] The association Pro Asyl and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation recorded, at the end of June 2015, 36 reception centres for refugees being set on fire in 2014 and 11 during the first half of 2015. This was part of many more attacks (250 in 2014 and 98 in 2015) against these centres. To a large extent these attacks were committed by neo-Nazi groups.

[2] PEGIDA (European Patriots against the Islamization of the West) is movement that was launched in October 2014. See Manuel Kellner, [PEGIDA "Euros" an ultra-reactionary, Islamophobic and racist movement](#) ; and [Where does Pegida come from?](#)