

Germany: Take off without a left wing?

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The congress of the Party for Jobs and Social Justice- Electoral Alternative (WASG) on April 29 marked a turning-point in its short history. The fusion with the Left Party-PDS (L.PDS) in order to create together a broad left party is something that has been decided and will very probably happen in July 2007. We should note that this broad left party already exists for many people who are not in the habit of studying political information with a magnifying glass, because of the existence of a joint parliamentary group between the WASG and the L.PDS in the Bundestag (it has 54 MPs, of whom 12 are from the WASG). But it was above all the attitude of the new party towards social-liberal policies - and therefore its electoral tactics - that divided the congress.

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Two of the WASG’s state-level federations - those of Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania - have in fact decided to take advantage of the regional elections to condemn the policies of the regional governments that are made up of the SPD and the L.PDS. They had announced autonomous lists of candidates, which were therefore in competition with the L.PDS.

The motive for the autonomous lists is clear: it is a revolt against the policies of the L.PDS, which governs jointly, as a junior partner, with the SPD, applying neo-liberal policies, policies of privatisations and anti-social austerity.

Especially in Berlin, these policies are spectacularly aggressive. For example the Berlin region has left the association of public sector employers so as to be able more easily to impose the recourse to unpaid labour and a fall in real wages.

What seems paradoxical is that within the WASG everyone, or almost everyone, criticises these policies (that is the case with Oscar Lafontaine himself). But the majority do so while denouncing as a sacrilege the idea of autonomous lists and accepting the idea of administrative measures against those who advocate them.

For their part, the “rebels” stress that they want a big common party, a big left party, but that they want it to be a credible party, which does not align itself in practice with the established neo-liberal political consensus. Others again, although they consider that standing candidates in competition with the L.PDS smacks of adventurism, do not accept that the federal leadership (the German Republic is a federation) should impose its point of view on federation by administrative measures.

A “normalisation?”

At the national congress on April 29 the motion ruling out any recourse to administrative measures against the WASG federations of Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, supported by among others our comrade Thies Gleiss (who is a member of the federal leadership of the WASG), was rejected by a narrow majority of congress delegates. Congress therefore supported the majority of the federal leadership in its readiness to try everything, including administrative measures, against the two rebel federations.

A big campaign was waged against “sectarians” who dared to “put in question” the creation of this new left party which is wished for by millions of people. This campaign was accompanied by a witch hunt against Trotskyists...

The majority in the congress was narrowly won by the authority of Oscar Lafontaine, who intervened three times in the debate without officially having the right to speak (he was not a delegate) and by his threat, made shortly before the congress, to split the WASG if the leadership did not win a majority on this point. And the leaders of the L.PDS, especially the bosses of its apparatus like Bodo Ramelow and Dietmar Bartsch, repeated again and again: ‘you have to discipline your rebel federations’!

A few days after the congress, the leadership of the WASG decided to remove the leaderships of the federations of Berlin and Mecklenburg - West Pomerania and replace them by commissars. The Bundestag member Huseyin Aydin played this role in Berlin and his first act was to withdraw the announcement of the Berlin WASG candidacy.

Right to his face, the delegates at the congress of the Berlin federation of the WASG reaffirmed their readiness to stand in the regional elections in Berlin in September 2006. Huseyin Aydin therefore declared that it wasn’t a congress but a “discussion forum”. The conflict is of course political. But there are also legal proceedings on both sides and no one knows what the courts are going to decide.

This way of acting by the leadership of WASG, which is already largely dominated by the apparatus of the L.PDS, is being repeated in other regions and cities. All over the country they are trying to isolate, remove from any position and marginalise “the evil spirits”. Already disappointment is developing and members who have a strong anti neo-liberal, anti-capitalist and/or anti-bureaucratic identity are resigning and leaving the party. Others are beginning to organize tendencies.

Liberal Offensive

These quarrels within the left are now taking place in a political and social context that is marked by the liberal offensive. The government of the grand coalition (CDU/CSU-SPD) presided over by chancellor Angela Merkel is pursuing the same policies as the SPD-Green government of Gerhard Schroeder. The “Hartz IV” law against the unemployed - which led to big mobilizations - is going to be made worse, because it is said to be “too expensive”. The conditions of the unemployed are going to be even worse as a result of the new law.

What is more, the governmental majority has just decided on a sizeable increase in tax revenue which will affect almost exclusively the workers and the poor, although the whole thing is crowned by a wealth tax which is at the most cosmetic. At the core of these measures there is the increase in VAT to 19%, which represents far and away the bulk of new tax revenue.

The trade unions are not ready to mobilise against this government. The majority of the members of their leaderships still consider that "their party" (the SPD) has remained in government and that therefore they have to stay quiet, even though the SPD is nothing more than the junior partner of the conservatives. On the social level the trade union movement remains on the defensive.

The congress of the DGB trade union federation, which started on May 22nd, took place under the slogan "the dignity of the human being is our criterion". And its president, Michael Sommer, referring to the millions of unemployed, of casual workers, and of poor exploited workers, said just before the congress: "Even although the situation is difficult, for trade union militants that is not a reason to give up. Together we are fighting for a better world, a more just world, so that human beings can live and work in dignity. So that dignity is not just a word, but that it is lived".

Yes, but... The German trade unions, which are known for their legendary organizational strength, are in a terrible crisis. After German reunification, in other words the absorption of the GDR by the Federal Republic in 1991, there were more than 11 million trade union members (the 8 million of the DGB complemented by the members of the unions of the ex-GDR). Ten years later, at the end of 2000, there were no more than 7.9 million. Today there are no more than 6.8 million members of the unions that form part of the DGB. In this framework by far the strongest unions are IG-Metall with 35.1% of the DGB's members, followed by Ver.di (the big union of public and private services) with 34.8%. Each of them has just come out of a social conflict and they have concluded new collective bargaining agreements.

IG-Metall, taking advantage of the present economic mini-boom, won a 3% wage increase and defended, more or less, the gain that is represented by rest and recreational pauses in the working day. Ver.di "won" agreement that unpaid labour should be less widespread than public sector employers wanted, through actions that were often more dynamic, creating important experiences of collective struggle for many public sector workers,. Although the movement in the two sectors took place at the same time, nothing was done to link them up together. What is more, the leaderships fled from the possibility of joint actions as the devil flees from holy water, because that would have carried the risk of a movement that would be generalised, indeed - horror of horrors! - "politicised".

On June 3rd in Berlin there was a demonstration against the Merkel government and its "reforms against us". This initiative was launched by part of the social and community movements, as well as by socialist and revolutionary militants - our comrades of the RSB were particularly involved in it. The initiative was taken up by ATTAC Germany, by the WASG, and by the L.PDS, as well as the Left Party group in the Bundestag, who associated themselves with the appeal. From the beginning the small coordinating committee of militant trade unionist called on people to take part in the demonstration. The leader of Ver.di, Frank Bsirske, agreed to speak to the demonstrators. But... the trade union leaderships did not call for the demonstration. The importance of this demonstration therefore depended, as in November 2003, on the echo the appeal had among Berliners and the population of the region around Berlin, and also on the ability of militant trade unionists to mobilise tens of thousands of workers.

Anti-capitalists of the L.PDS and the WASG

On June 3rd twenty thousand demonstrated in the streets of Berlin, fewer than would have been possible with the active support of the unions. The demonstrators represented a broad layer of the trade unions, and especially IG Metall and ver.di, as well as organisations of students, peace activists, migrants and the unemployed. Police encroached on the demonstration seriously; many were hurt indiscriminately.

It was important for the future of the new left party. A “cold climate” is favourable to the forces of opportunistic adaptation within the political Left. A climate of revolt and mobilisation will be favourable to the “rebels” who do not accept the implementation of neo-liberalism and anti-social austerity in practice, decorated with anti-neo-liberalism in Sunday speeches.

The years 2004 and 2005 were marked by a crisis of the SPD. The regional elections in 2006 have shown that this crisis has not deepened and that the “new Left” WASG-L.PDS has not continued its electoral dynamic in the regions of the West, and that it is in danger of falling back into the “ghetto” of before. The exasperation of the working class electorate has been expressed more by abstention than by voting to the left of the SPD and the Greens. In order to re-launch hope hundreds of thousands, if not millions, will have to take to the streets. But if the new force on the political Left appears increasingly to be part of this apathetic political world that governs us under the orders of big capital, then it will be despair that is likely to dominate.

In May an “anti-capitalist appeal” appeared. Coming from personalities and left currents within the L.PDS (Kommunistische Plattform, Marxistisches Forum, Geraer Dialog/Linker Dialog) it was signed by 500 people, including members of the WASG. It was widely distributed on the Internet and as a pamphlet. Its initiators called a meeting on June 10th in Berlin, which around 80 activists attended.

On May 20th in Kassel, right in the geographical centre of Germany, there took place “the conference of the left opposition in the WASG”. 250 people took part, of whom about 50 were mobilised by the rebel majority of the Berlin WASG. The conference adopted a declaration condemning the administrative measures taking against the regional federations of Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, demanding the building of a new left party that would be broad and credible, run democratically by its members and linked to social movements and to struggles in the workplaces, the universities, schools, and neighbourhoods, giving priority to extra parliamentary work and using elected positions to encourage the mobilization and the self-organization of those below, rejecting substitutionalism and especially a policy of governing together of the SPD, and explaining that according to the programme of the WASG, participation in government is only acceptable if this government leads to real substantial gains for the workers and marginalized layers.

This congress launched the basis of a network of all those who want to fight for consistent anti-neo-liberal politics, defending the interests of workers and marginalized layers, while conducting and popularising a debate on an alternative to capitalism, on a “socialism of the 21st century”.

To this end the congress supported the association SALZ e.V (Social, Work, Life and Future), close to the WASG but independent, open to socialist and Marxist ideas, as well as the virtual presences www.linkezeitung.de and www.linkspartei-debate.de, and called for the co-organisation of a broad common conference in the autumn, together with the forces of the “anti-capitalist appeal”, which for their part are mainly based in the east of Germany.

P.S.

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