

Germany : What now for Die Linke ? - A new generation

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On 27 February 2021 Germany's Die Linke ("The Left") party elected two new presidents - Janine Wissler and Susanne Hennig-Wellsow - as well as a new executive.

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Many of the new members of this leadership belong to the younger generation who are committed to renewing the party : making it a modern socialist party based on its membership. There are great opportunities for Die Linke, but the party also faces enormous challenges.

A new generation

The party is entering a new phase. New presidents bringing a new breath of fresh air after years of internal dissension, have been elected. This vote was important. But that's not the point. What is decisive is something else : the congress showed the face of a new, younger party. For this generation, the old traditions conveyed by activists who grew up politically in the 1970s and 1980s are less important.

This new generation has formed in the movements against the far right (from Pegida to the AfD), in the Die Linke campaigns on housing or health and in the movement for climate justice. Many of them have gained experience in trade union work and some are young full time officials in their unions. But most of them went through formal high school rather than vocational high school, and many went on to higher education.

The configuration of currents within the party has changed dramatically. Sozialistische Linke, long powerful in western Germany, has lost its importance. In particular because several of its most visible representatives made it the heart of the resistance against the overhaul of Die Linke started in 2012 : towards a left capable of campaigning and organizing people, a party whose members can experiment, and at the same time establish a battle plan on all central social questions. On the new party executive, made up of 44 people, there are no members of Sozialistische Linke, while 20 candidates were elected with the support of Bewegungslinke ("the left in movement"). It would be hasty to take this as a shift to the left because the range of reformers who, in particular, give importance to government participation, can also be satisfied with this congress. The reformers are well represented in the leadership and in this sense this orientation has also been consolidated in the party.

Bewegungslinke was formed during the battle over the overhaul of the party. Through the interventions of Katja Kipping and more particularly Bernd Riexinger, this young current supported and defended new ways of envisaging the activity of the party. It sees itself as a "left class" current in seeing the class struggle as a central engine of development in which Die Linke must actively participate. However, it intends to combine the class struggle with fighting other forms of oppression and discrimination. This is why it also defines itself as fundamentally feminist, anti-racist and ecological.

What is striking about this congress is not the twenty members of the leadership supported by the "left of the movement" but the fact that it became clear to what extent the strategic renewal has borne fruit. And this renewal was not about a single current, but involved most members - beyond the demarcation of currents and other affiliations.

Either way, today's Die Linke is no longer 2012's Die Linke. The strategic framework has shifted. Janine Wissler reaffirmed during the congress that "solidarity is indivisible". This basically indicates an extension of the scope of intervention. Naturally, Die Linke is the party which defends a socialist renewal of the welfare state and fights against the militarization of foreign policy. But it also wants to be the party of anti-fascist and anti-racist resistance, and of climate justice. "Solidarity is indivisible" indicates in this respect the attempt to forge new alliances within the social movement capable of implementing a fundamental change in politics. It means uniting those who live in precariousness with the core of the working class, still not exposed to it, and middle class wage-earners. And also uniting those who are involved in different social movements or sympathize with them.

Die Linke is therefore faced with a series of challenges which it must meet and with opportunities which it must seize.

A unifying political project and a unifying political culture

A major challenge in the coming months and years to come will be relaunching a project around a political culture reinforcing what is common to members from different social backgrounds and political sensitivities who organize themselves within Die Linke. Calls for unity, important as they are, will not be enough. Unifying means addressing other experiences, other priorities and other values so that differences should not be overlooked, but made fruitful through common political work.

This works all the better when all the energy is devoted to developing good proposals for political reforms, trying together to generate enthusiasm around Die Linke, linking initiatives and organizations with a view to building alliances and attacking political opponents. A unifying political culture must not wipe out differences of opinion, but develop customs and rules that put what is common first, thus making it possible to reinforce each other. Such bonds and agreements are best forged around practical tasks. Both, however, require curiosity, respect, and the ability to abide by democratic decisions. Overcoming a culture of suspicion and animosity - such as has pervaded Die Linke in recent years - is therefore a matter of party survival.

Demonstrating that a rebel government could impose advanced reforms

The age-old question of how Die Linke can implement its demands will once again be on the agenda. Susanne Hennig-Wellsow, one of the two new presidents, has an aggressive ambition to lead a coalition government with the SPD and the Greens. The idea that Die Linke must seek a left government in Germany is correct. What will be questionable, however - and this is anything but a detail - is exactly what it will mean when possible and what will have to happen for Die Linke to

become “fit to rule”. Neither Susanne Hennig-Wellsow nor Katja Kipping who, in recent years, in a slightly less provocative way, has gone in the same direction, have made contributions providing a more concrete approach to the challenges and problems posed by such a strategy, as well as the intermediate stages it implies. “We want, we should, we can” certainly sounds voluntarist, but clarifies little. It would be desirable for this debate to be carried out more intensively.

A left government will not be possible this autumn. There is currently no basis for a “government of solidarity and democratic renewal”. There is hardly any serious exchange between the parties and the social forces associated with them. A coalition for change exists at best in the minds of a few activists and leaders, and even then, it is a vague thing at most. But a government, which must impose reforms in a context of confrontation, cannot be suspended in the air. Even so, sceptical members of Die Linke would be well advised not to give a simple “No” to the government option and not to hide defensively behind red stop lines. In particular, the Die Linke left should develop the party’s capacity to exercise power in a rebel government.

The prerequisite is to be able to organize (or co-organize) social conflicts and translate them into advanced reforms - through an arduous confrontation with part of the administration, the right, the bourgeoisie and a part of the middle class. So, what are the reforms that the party should undertake ? Will Die Linke be strong enough to weather the storms that a policy of ambitious reform would unleash ? What should our political project, which should be more than the sum of a few reforms, but should show where we want the country to go in the short and medium term, look like ? How can we prevent Die Linke from going into the arena like a tiger advocating real reforms and ending up as a rug for the Greens and Social Democrats (“we can’t do more, the balance of power isn’t there”) ? And then : how to build in the coming years genuine political alliances which can genuinely support and impose such a development model for a more united and democratic Germany ? And, not the least of things : how does such a project bring us closer to socialism, how do we make socialism more plausible ?

Learn to enter into conflict, build power

An absolute prerequisite for this kind of capacity to govern is the building of social power - but also of the organizing power of Die Linke itself. A left-wing party in a position to govern must also be able to fight. Anyone who honestly views the state of Die Linke will have to admit that it is going to take quite a bit of practice to reach that level.

Organizational power emerges when activists want to get moving, act enthusiastically on their own milieu, continue to educate themselves politically and also when it is possible to create more dedicated full time posts. Social power and organizational power are obviously not the same thing, but the two go hand in hand.

Die Linke does not have social power when it is content to denounce political and social problems of everyday life and to turn them into political questions, ideas and demands that are debated around a table. It has social power when people beyond its own ranks want to defend it. The more activists there are, the better the political education, the more the party is an attractive interlocutor on the ground, the easier it is to get there. Making Die Linke a party anchored in society that connects people, evolves their ideas and can exist during social confrontations is in this sense a prerequisite to being able to govern the country in a context of conflict. and transform it.

Wanting to be a party of government without being able to become a party of struggles will certainly lead to political defeat. Thus, it will be important to strengthen Die Linke as a party existing on the ground, which organizes around social themes and is visible in local parliaments, in order to support

initiatives and movements and make alternatives at the local level tangible : Saving the hospitals ? A green transition in transport ? Housing construction ? The results of the recent regional elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate showed that much remains to be done in these areas. Substantial results in a few cities (this also applies to the most recent municipal election results in Hesse) indicate that there is also promising potential.

Providing answers to central political upheavals

However, Die Linke will soon have to build this social power while providing practical responses to three central political upheavals.

Firstly, to overcome the economic and health aspects of the Covid crisis, the federal government has spent a lot of money on economic aid and social support, for example through the short-time working allowance. The programmatic shifts of the SPD and the Grünen are more interesting. Both will make social promises in the coming months, ahead of the Bundestag elections. From my point of view, the question of whether this will for example lead to a change in their current policy remains open, even if scepticism is in order. The test will come after the Bundestag elections, as the price of the Covid crisis policy will have to be paid. It is easy to get confused with forecasts, but a top-down redistribution policy will not be on the agenda of the next government coalition, particularly if it is a coalition between the CDU-CSU and the Greens. In the coming year we will have to wage defensive struggles and fight for a different distribution of wealth. Die Linke must prepare for this, raise awareness in the unions and think about initiatives in favour of alliances.

Secondly, the ecological and social transition is already underway today - and will accelerate. In the workplaces, it is accompanied by a new wave of rationalization. Work and life will be changed (digitalization). We are not entering a period of stability, but of upheaval. In the car industry, both in large groups and among subcontractors, all of this is already omnipresent. This ecological and social transition will be shaped from above if the social left - and in particular, Die Linke - does not intervene. What needs to be done so that the interests of workers, employees and the unemployed are at the centre of concerns and not those of companies and financial speculators ? On the basis of the proposals formulated - such as that of a "left green transition" by Bernd Riexinger - practical answers could be found within the framework of an in-depth discussion with works councils and employee representatives, trade unionists and activists from the environmental and climate justice movement. Those who do not want the transformation of the economy and society to take place under the leadership of a coalition of conservative parties and the Greens, must put into practice alternative socialist and ecological solutions. This implies clear reform proposals, which to a certain extent must be utopian : stating what is necessary and not just what is conceivable. As a party, it will be necessary to bring social concerns into the movement for climate and environmental justice and to be active in it ; and it will also be necessary to listen and advance the debate on left-wing responses. Believing we have a stock of truths (ranging from more or less left-wing Keynesianism to the revolutionary tradition) that would suffice to deliver does not add much anyway.

Thirdly, the far right which is radicalizing in this country is not defeated, even if the AfD has not been on the rise lately. The danger lies in its continued development in eastern Germany, where it is at its most fascistic. The AfD crisis should not deceive us, in particular because the social poison that fed it (social insecurity, loss of confidence in traditional parties, existing racist and authoritarian attitudes) is still there and can be spread more in times of crisis. The challenge remains to express the legitimate anger of people who, disappointed, turn to the far right, without drawing the wrong conclusion that the bulk of frustrated people are tempted to become radical nationalists, because they are voters disappointed with the left.

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