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Germany

A capitulation to the zeitgeist and prevailing winds in Germany

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The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance party has shifted the givens of the political situation... but in the wrong direction. For those who have been, for the past two decades, active members of the Die Linke party and one of its predecessor organisations, the “Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice” (WASG), mostly in leadership positions, the founding congress of the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) party, which was held at the end of January 2024 in Berlin, looked like a family reunion where everyone knew each other very well. There were nearly 450 people, most of them quite old, who had been active for more than twenty years in Die Linke, the WASG and the PDS. [1] They were mainly men and mostly “bio-Deutsch”. [2] Until recently, many of them have held paid positions or important positions within the party apparatus or its parliamentary or governmental structures.

This meeting of founding members of the new party was carefully composed by a preparatory circle without democratic legitimacy: not everyone who wanted to become a member was allowed to do so, far from it – even long-standing members of the Bundestag, such as Diether Dehm, were turned away. [3] But most of those who were admitted had a common background within Die Linke. There have been a few exotic exceptions, presented as newcomers with a particular quality.

A right-wing and bureaucratic evolution

In a laborious process of differentiation, largely embodied in struggles for positions or for motions and amendments defended individually at the various congresses of Die Linke, and most often taking the form of statements to the press, interviews and personal accusations, the group that led to the BSW project had de facto decided that it no longer wanted to be part of the left. This has not been supported by a coherent programmatic text, nor have there been any motions of principle or substantive counter-proposals presented to the conferences and bodies of Die Linke. The only thing that could be sensed was a gradual dissociation from the party. The lack of electoral success and the noxious internal battles for seats within the party have regularly fuelled this frustration.

The great political issues of the time – the growing threats of war, the accelerating destruction of climatic conditions and the biosphere, the rise of right-wing, authoritarian and racist parties, the increase in migration and exodus on a global scale due to the living conditions that capitalism imposes everywhere, the phenomena of impoverishment even in high-wage countries – have of course played a certain role in the process of erosion of this party that had previously achieved success. But only in a very indirect way, because at the heart of this evolution were bureaucratic struggles developing among the people employed by Die Linke, its parliamentary groups and its subsidiary structures.

Towards differentiation and rupture

There has been a power struggle between the apparatus of the parliamentary groups and that of the party, a phenomenon that has characterized the descent into hell of all the left-wing parties that preceded it. In these clashes, the groupings changed according to the political considerations of the day. For several years, the so-called “horseshoe” alliance between the moderate reformist governmental left – which since the time of the founding of Die Linke had not been satisfied with the Erfurt Programme (adopted at the 2011 congress) and would have liked to find

in it a greater acceptance of capitalism and militarism – and the tradition of the Communist Platform, frozen in nostalgia for the former German Democratic Republic, together with the social democratic supporters of the theory of “state monopoly capitalism”, marked the fate of the parliamentary group and left its mark on the election campaigns. At a faster pace than the parliamentary groups, the party's governing bodies have transformed themselves – a process consciously chosen and defended against all attempts at democratisation – but have always been weaker than the power of the parliamentary groups. The vast majority of Die Linke's 60,000 members have found themselves increasingly sidelined from all these developments. The party still has more than 50,000 members, but they are still excluded from the debates.

This process of erosion of Die Linke has now reached a breaking point. A self-proclaimed group of former officials gathered in Berlin for the founding meeting of a new party. Politically very different people are coming together, whereas they had almost nothing to say to each other in recent years and only met in the context of tactical alliances.

The big outsider: Sahra Wagenknecht

Sahra Wagenknecht is the only one of them who, throughout this journey, has made assertive choices and clear programmatic statements. She has decided, in the course of a long personal journey, that a left that claims to be part of the workers' movement, of Marxism, of the revolutionary processes of expropriation and reappropriation, is no longer adapted to our time. She loudly displays her “counter-programme” as a “left-wing conservative” force which defends the market economy, meritocracy, the withdrawal of politics into the nation, the regulation of immigration, opposes the “delirium on quotas and gender”, the “exaggerated protection of the climate” and all that “bric-a-brac”. Theoretically, she shamelessly plunders the bourgeois preachers of the “social market economy”, the thinkers of right-wing social democracy and even the nationalist positions of the new right in her struggle for a “normal Germany”.

Moreover, Wagenknecht has never put this “counter-programme” to her party. No party congress, no meeting of the executive committee, no general assembly of a local federation has had the opportunity to discuss it with her. There were not even factional meetings of the fringes of Die Linke that could endorse Wagenknecht's new theses.

A star for a rightist project

The only sounding board for Sahra Wagenknecht's political theses were the mainstream media, which have nothing to do with the left and are traditionally anti-socialist and anti-communist in Germany, both in the analogue and digital worlds. By the way she presented herself, her particular form of political closure, but also by her rhetorical talents, Sahra Wagenknecht had many assets to become a media star who is nevertheless now almost worn out to the core.

This media star brilliantly plays all roles at once: a key witness against the old conventional left and the workers' movement, a left-wing endorsement of the terrible policy of deportation and lockdown against migrants, an opposition to social protests against climate destruction and for social justice on a global scale, and a priestess of a new “promotion of common sense”, anchored in the fifties instead of the class struggle. Her “critique” of “bad” capitalism, greedy capitalism, is readily appreciated in managers' seminars and lobbyists' meetings.

As a media star Sahra Wagenknecht has hundreds of thousands of followers; the vast majority of them are “left-wing conservatives” like Wagenknecht herself, but more crudely. With her attitude and theories, she does not allow any evolution to the left, only a crystallization of political positions in the political space of the right. She covers a field that

has been individualized and atomized by capitalist reality, which is imbued with social disappointments and for whom the vulgar style of the far right "Alternative für Deutschland" is unacceptable.

“We don't want to be left-wing anymore”

Few of the former leaders of Die Linke who met in Berlin for the founding of BSW find the indigestible mush of Sahra Wagenknecht's political theses convincing. But everyone appreciates the media glare that surrounds it.

It is very useful in their efforts, which are not left-wing conservatism but organizational conservatism, to pursue or revive a career as a functionary. It fuels dreams of seeing political success return without going to too much trouble. At the same time, the “theories” and public appearances of this media star are so ambivalent and opportunistic that they give a wide range of political options hope that, sooner or later, things will go back in the desired direction: the eternal social democrats trained in the school of state monopoly capitalism, the former permanent members of the Communist Platform and the West German Communist Party loyal to the GDR, the Stalinists who have been members of the SED for decades, the former trade union leaders who still believe in the fads of social partnership.

At this meeting in Berlin, it was not a question of thinking or laying foundations, but only of applauding and confirming what had been agreed in previous discussions. The rest was just media staging. The last decision taken at these preliminary meetings was to no longer address each other as “comrade” but to call each other “friend”. The scariest thing was not the new vocabulary, but the fact that this costume change went off without a hitch. No one made the slightest mistake, even those who, only the day before, were using the old names fluently.

A drift with no return

The other submissions of the founding congress were also written in advance. There were no alternative candidates for leadership positions or for the list for the European elections. No questions were asked of the candidates. With the exception of former Düsseldorf mayor Thomas Geisel (who received only 66 percent), who was clearly perceived as an unusual reactionary Social Democrat, all the votes were “won” by more than 90 percent. The programme for the European elections was approved without debate or a vote against.

An assembly of people who only yesterday claimed to be on the left has decided that from now on they no longer want to be left-wing, but simply “reasonable” people. It is this kind of abjuration that, on the one hand, is appreciated by the bourgeois media world because they like betrayal but not traitors, and which, on the other hand, means embarking on a slippery path that will in no way lead back to left-wing, solidified positions, but will instead lead to ever more right-wing positions and the validation of the system in place.

Political processes and social dynamics

When, in the late 1970s, the foundations of the Green Party were laid, its battle cry was also “We are not on the right, not on the left, but for advance”. A significant number of former leaders of left-wing organizations also proclaimed this, even if their persuasiveness was less than that of Petra Kelly, for example. But this break with the past was met with a broad sentiment, marked by the anti-nuclear, environmentalist, pacifist and feminist movements, which ensured that the new party could only develop to the left. The right-wing forces quickly broke away and, until 1986,

the Greens generally continued to move to the left. It was only then that this trend began to reverse towards the extremism of the current Greens.

The creation of Die Linke also began with the break of many social democrats and conservatives in the PDS with their tradition, and more it was feared that the union of the WASG and the PDS would lead to an abandonment of well-established positions and a shift to the right. The opposite happened: against the background of effective social struggles against the Hartz IV neoliberal economic reforms and also against the destruction of the environment, Die Linke became a force capable of achieving successes, whose only prospect of development was on the left. This process was only reversed by the growth of structurally conservative forces within the party and the retreat of social movements, which revived the old right-wing forces within the party, a development that we, the current of the party called the Anti-Capitalist Left, have extensively described and criticized.

An unavoidable process

Now, a new attempt is being made by claiming that they no longer want to be on the left, but simply “for advance” and reasonable. But it corresponds to an adaptation, a shift to the right, in full expansion, on a mass scale. This cannot lead to a return to left-wing positions. The BSW party is therefore not – contrary to what some people claim today – a transitional stage towards a new mass party of the left, but the beginning of a theoretical flattening and an ever further political adaptation to the right. The slippery slope to the right is mapped out and many BSW members are more attracted to hundreds of thousands of supporters on the right than to left-wing positions that may have been theirs in the past.

The whole construction of the BSW as an artificial media project and the focus of strategic debates on elections and election polls will only reinforce this evolution.

Peace as a unifying theme

It is claimed – and this is not entirely false – that it is the common position against war that constitutes the central and unifying theme of BSW. But the question is how far this commonality of views goes. In contrast to Die Linke and its ever-current programme – which, contrary to BSW's claims, has been confirmed at all party congresses – BSW, or rather the leader who gives it its name, does not present war as the result of capitalist relations of production, but only as a “political failure.” It is therefore limited to a moral criticism that has virtually no practical significance. The anti-war appeal of Sahra Wagenknecht and Alice Schwarzer, signed by nearly a million people, fizzled out. It did not create or strengthen any lasting anti-war initiatives. A glance at BSW's programme for the European elections, in which a greater autonomous profile for the European Union is mentioned, raises fears that Oskar Lafontaine's old proposal for the creation of military units specific to the European Union, or at least Franco-German, will be introduced through the back door.

In a lengthy statement, the anti-capitalist Left current of Die Linke rightly called BSW a “right-wing social democratic ghost ship.” It reads:

“The response that Sahra Wagenknecht and the group of Die Linke members gathered around her want to give to the crisis of Die Linke is wrong in every respect and one can only hope that the project it conveys will meet a quick end.

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- The association supporting the BSW project seeks to save itself from the effects of parliamentarism by limiting itself to parliamentarism. It brings together a group of parliamentarians whose ties with the party had been largely severed and who sought to compensate for this by denouncing the party's executive committee. Insiders know that members of this group didn't have much to say to each other on most political issues in the past. The first assumption that prevails is therefore that it is leading figures in Die Linke, well represented at the parliamentary level, who are in the process of managing their own future.
- The creation of the BSW association is an opaque enterprise driven from above, in which only those who are approved by the top are associated. This is a delirious demolition of what was left of the pretence of functioning governed by the principles of democracy at the grassroots. After 170 years of experience in the workers' movement, we know that it is almost impossible to build a left-wing party solely through election campaigns, but trying to do so on the basis of media stunts concocted by a small group means only one thing: what will result will be anything but a left-wing organization.
- As a preamble to its Erfurt programme, Die Linke had chosen (at Oskar Lafontaine's personal request) Bertolt Brecht's poem, "A Worker Reads History." In it, he shows perfectly that only the millions of people who actively oppose the power of millionaires by building an alternative will be able to break it. The historical narrative organized around the great enlightened leader is nothing but a tissue of lies. In the face of this, we are simply amazed to see how adult and cultured left-wing activists can adopt for their new association a construction scheme that has nothing to envy from the cult of personality.
- The focus on the cult of Sahra Wagenknecht – which is much more than just a choice of name to attract the public's attention – will at the same time be the fatal starting point from which the media – who are currently promoting the BSW club with euphoric accents and caressing it in the wrong direction with polls – will ruthlessly manipulate this new formation and eventually pass it on to the trapdoor.
This project, which is likely to be worse than the previous one, Aufstehen, will also end in political disaster and personal tragedy.
- The programmatic bases of the association "Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht - for Reason and Justice" do not seem to play a big role in its creation. It has already been a feat to produce such a set of texts without content! Anyone who consults the BSW website and makes the effort to read the foundations of the association will find, next to the Reichstag building in Berlin decorated with German flags (at least the BSW did not make the embarrassing mistake of the CDU and took a real photo of the building), short texts on the so-called "important topics."

In these texts, everything that established a programmatic link with the left has been erased. These are positions that can be blindly adopted by any bourgeois party. It's about Germany as a location for industrial production, about meritocracy, performance-based wages, an innovative market economy, German companies inventing the technologies to roll back climate change, honesty and common sense – and so on, as if the fifties were back. Back to the future in Wagenknecht's flying car. And of course, one of the few concrete demands must not be missing: "immigration to Germany must be regulated and restricted." It is so isolated and concrete in this jumble of words that the suspicion arises that this might well be the main meaning of the whole operation.

Everything is still valid in this assessment. The BSW may achieve some initial successes at the electoral level, but it will not be the success of a left-wing party, nor will it foster the emergence of such a left-wing party. At the same time, it is to be feared that the entire structure of the BSW project, which is fundamentally conceived as a public relations operation, the total absence of democracy, the totally deficient programmatic and strategic bases and principles, will all favour the steps aimed at manipulating this project from the outside, increasing the pressure of the right and declaring the failure thus provoked, nevertheless, and once again, as a failure of Die Linke. In this sense, the fate of the German and European left is unfortunately linked to that of the BSW and its defeats will have repercussions beyond the BSW.

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[1] Die Linke (The Left) is a left-wing party born from the merger in 2007 of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, ex-SED, official party of the German Democratic Republic) and the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG, a grouping in 2005 of the social democratic left, trade unionists and sectors of the West German far left.

[2] An initially ironic term for Germans without foreign origins, which could have been translated as “ethnic Germans”. The term is now being taken up by the German right.

[3] Dehm is a singer, a member of the SPD and then of Die Linke. He was expelled from the assembly but is nevertheless a member of the BSW.