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Germany

Crisis of the SPD and the New "Left Party"

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The regional elections in North Rhine-Westphalia on May 22, 2005 mark a significant turning point in the German political situation and particularly in the crisis of German social democracy. The SPD lost its last land (regional government), and moreover one that was a traditional bastion that it had held for 39 years.

For the first time, the SPD did not just lose votes to abstention, but also to the conservative CDU, whose candidate proudly proclaimed after these elections that the CDU had become the "biggest workers' party" in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Should we believe that 290,000 former SPD voters really think that the CDU is the best defender of their interests? No, rather it represents a reflex of despair.

The CDU defends virtually the same programme as the SPD, and they wish to infringe still further against the social rights of wage earners, the unemployed and so on. But, the argument would run, would they not be "more competent" than the social democrats, which means "would they not be closer to the bosses, thus more capable of ensuring that there would be more productive investment and less unemployment, and, one fine day, also less pressure for austerity?"

For the first time in a long time the SPD also lost to a new political formation to its left and one that put social problems to the fore of its demands: the Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) [1].

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/essenwasg.jpg>]
WASG supporters on the march in Essen

This latter succeeded not only in setting itself up, organizing candidacies in all the constituencies and gathering the necessary signatures, but also in gaining 2.2% of the votes. Around 180,000 people voted for the new party; 60,000 had abstained five years ago, but 50,000 are former SPD voters.

Decline of the SPD

Since the elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, the SPD has fallen continually in the opinion polls at the federal level. It is solidly stuck below the imaginary barrier of 30%, and is currently at 26% (Forsa institute). It also continues to lose members - starting from nearly 900.000 members a few years ago, it has less than 600,000 currently. To measure the depth of the crisis that these figures reflect, we need to go back some decades.

At Bad Godesberg in 1958, when the SPD adopted a new programme eliminating any reference to Marxism and abandoning socialism as alternative project of society to capitalism (in the programme adopted at Bad Godesberg, socialism appeared only as an "ethical" reference), its objective was precisely to emerge from the legendary "ghetto" of 30%.

Effectively, the "comrade tendency" ("der Genosse Trend") was on the march, the culminating point being 1972, when the SPD won more than 45% of the votes and became, for the first time, the majority party.

The background to this was the revolt of the late 1960s combining with a need for reform inherent in the capitalist society of this time. SPD leader Willy Brandt expressed simultaneously the need for reform of the system, the integration of new emancipatory aspirations and the interests in social promotion of the working class base of the SPD.

It was about the opening up of the universities to youth of working class origin, "Ostpolitik" [\[2\]](#) and the slogan "dare more democracy" (the authoritarian-bigot-conservative republic of Konrad Adenauer and his Christian Democratic successors being the negative reference).

And it was also about the feeling, nourished by the economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, that one could continue to improve little by little the fate and living conditions of the mass of wage earners without touching the limits of system. In these conditions, the SPD was capable of safeguarding its role as a party which expressed (in however tortuous a fashion) the aspirations (and illusions) of a significant number of employees and which was at the same time open to the new layers.

Today the SPD seems once again enclosed in the shackles of 30%. Its decline is obviously the consequence of its neoliberal turn, motivated by the demands of a capitalism in decline, with stagnant and depressive tendencies. Henceforth, the bourgeoisie demands massive social regression, lower wages, the worsening of working conditions and so on, to counter the fall in the rate of profit.

Gerhard Schröder had said that it was necessary to win the votes of the "new centre". But this time the votes of the new "intermediary" layers were revealed as a somewhat unstable phenomenon, while the erosion of the popular electoral base of the SPD is palpable.

In the first half of the 1970s, cultural intelligence was "on the left" and the right was considered as backward and not very bright; today stupidity and retrograde obscurantism are the new cult, while all those who refer to social rights, defence of the interests of wage earners and the dispossessed, resist the dismantling of the public services and social benefits, who wish to resist a policy for which the "market" (read: profit) is all, are considered as "backward conservatives".

A long time ago the political life at the base of the SPD expressed the aspiration of workers to their own political expression. For a long time this party has degenerated, to become a machine of mutual aid to organize political careers.

The last thread conserving the specificity of the SPD as a party emerging from the workers' movement was the link with the trade union apparatuses and leaderships. But this link has become quite precarious. It is precisely people from the intermediary apparatus of these unions (above all IG Metall and Ver.di, the big services union) who have, together with others, launched the WASG. And the majority of union leaderships, while maintaining the alliance against nature with the SPD, tolerate this!

Towards a new "Left Party"

The new "Left Party" - in gestation, at any rate in its present form - is to some extent the result of Gerhard Schröder's initiative seeking an early general election by organizing his own defeat in a vote of confidence in the Bundestag. It is still possible that the President of the Republic, Köhler, will not accept this legally dubious maneuver and it is also possible that the Supreme Court can reject it.

But after the electoral defeat in North Rhine-Westphalia, Schröder did not want to continue as if nothing had happened, nor did he want to resign. He wanted to cut short new waves of social protest and criticism inside of his own party and also make the formation of a new party to the left of the SPD more difficult. All these fine calculations do not seem to have worked out too well.

Social protests are already beginning to organize themselves. The German Social Forum at Erfurt at the end of July will be important in this respect. Criticism inside the SPD is growing, while the new "left party", even if does not yet formally exist, is rising systematically in the polls and is now at 11% in terms of voting intentions.

Already the SPD leadership has reacted and Schröder can no longer present "his policy", that of agenda 2010. He has been forced to present a modified political project, involving the introduction of a symbolic tax on the "rich", the correction of certain excesses of the Hartz IV plan (for example reintroduction of a longer period of payment of unemployment benefit I for those who have worked for decades and so on). [3]

After Oskar Lafontaine [4] - who joined the WASG a fortnight ago during the regional congress in North Rhine-Westphalia and was elected head of its provisional list [5] for the federal elections - a second well known member of the SPD, Ulrich Maurer of Baden-Württemberg, has just joined the WASG and the new "left party". A member of the SPD for 35 years and a longstanding regional deputy, Ulrich Maurer was even head of the SPD in the Baden-Württemberg region.

There will be others who will follow his example, to the extent that the new party rises in the polls. The WASG is moreover gaining 150 members per day and has just crossed the threshold of 7,000 members.

The announcement of an alliance of the PDS and WASG to work together in the federal elections has aroused a wave of hope and even enthusiasm. Last weekend, at the festival of the small German CP (DKP) in Dortmund, the biggest meeting, with 1,000 participants, was addressed by representatives of the PDS, the WASG, Attac, the German Social Forum and of course DKP president Heinz Stehr.

The latter announced that his party would support the electoral alliance while not wishing to enter in the new party which could be created during the year.

Formally, the alliance, for legal reasons, will function as an "open list" of the PDS. With Schröder having precipitated things, the leadership of the PDS and WASG do not feel themselves capable of creating a new party as quickly as would be necessary for the federal elections. However, the PDS will change its name to "Linkspartei" (Left Party).

It is very clear that this amounts to an alliance, and everybody has an interest in behaving as if it is. When the newly created WASG, with a budget significantly lower than that of the PDS which had "invested" massively in its electoral material, obtained 2.2% of the vote in North Rhine-Westphalia and the PDS only 0.9%, it became very clear to the PDS leaders that their party could no longer hope to break through in the west, while the WASG represented the possibility of a real electoral breakthrough to the left of the SPD.

So any behaviour which does not recognize that this amounts in reality to an alliance - with its major components the PDS in the East and WASG in the West - risks enclosing the PDS in its own "ghetto".

But won't this Left Party led by Lafontaine and PDS leader Gregor Gysi be very "rightist" at the beginning?

For sure, the programme and profile of the new formation will not be anti-capitalist. Its basic idea is Keynesianism, and already its lack of an internationalist concept is evident in its penchant for nationalist protectionism (against cheap labour coming from eastern Europe).

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Inside the formation, the forces of the revolutionary and anti-capitalist left will have to strengthen their intervention as a current of ideas: they will have to put forward concrete demands in the interests of wage earners and the excluded, lead a debate on strategy, and argue for international action and orientation, starting with a pan-European campaign for an upwards adaptation of social minima and wages, a significant reduction of working time without loss of wages, the use of finances for social ends and not for military adventures, for high quality public services and so on.

Even if nothing indicates that the leading personnel of the WASG will be more "to the left" than that of the PDS, it seems all the same clear enough for the moment, that the new "Left Party" will reflect a leftwards tendency, encourage the movement of social protest and make it more difficult for the PDS leadership to force through its policy of co-government with the SPD at the regional level.

That's why Gysi has said that there will be no question of co-governing with the SPD at the federal level. However, he added two days later (in the newspaper "Stern") that with a "changed" SPD and without the "neoliberal Gerhard Schröder" at the helm, it would certainly be possible. All this shows that the anti-capitalist left must make itself heard in the new party, which, in the medium term, could very well in its turn (after the SPD, the Greens and many others) take the road of adaptation...

[1] Wahlalternative - Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit. See articles in IV by [Angela Klein](#), May/June 2004 and [Manuel Kellner](#), January 2005.

[2] The policy of opening up a dialogue with east Germany and the other Soviet bloc states

[3] On the Hartz laws, see the articles in IV by [Thies Gleiss \(May 2004\)](#) and [Daniel Berger](#) (October 2004).

[4] Oskar Lafontaine was previously one of the main leaders of the SPD and it was largely thanks to him that Gerhard Schröder became leader of the party. He was minister of the economy in the first Schröder government, then resigned because of disagreement with the increasingly pro-employer and neoliberal orientation of the government.

[5] The German electoral system demands that, in order to obtain parliamentary representation, the parties cross a threshold of 5% of the vote on a national scale. The WASG currently only exists in West Germany, while in East Germany it is the PDS which occupies the political terrain to the left of social democracy. Neither of these two formations can be sure of crossing the barrier across the country as a whole and a merger between the two cannot be effected before the elections, if these latter are organized in September 2005. Hence the PDS has proposed to open its lists to the WASG, accepting that in the West it is the WASG which determines their composition. The list adopted by the WASG in North Rhine-Westphalia is, then, provisional, because it has yet to integrate the candidates proposed by the PDS.