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Germany

Germany: The anti-capitalist left after the success of Die Linke

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Elected to the Bundestag on September 27, 2009, Andrej Hunko is active in Die Linke in Aix-la-Chapelle, in the land de North Rhine-Westphalia. He belongs to the “Antikapitalistische Linke” (“Anti-capitalist Left”) current. He was interviewed for IV by Friedrich Dorn, a member of the internationale sozlistische linke (isl, international socialist left, one of the two parts of the German section of the Fourth International). The interview took place on October 19, 2009.

Friedrich Dorn: With the success of Die Linke in the recent parliamentary elections, what action do you think is possible for you in Parliament? What do you think of the composition of your parliamentary group?

Andrej Hunko: First, what is essential for me, is that I define myself as an integral part of the social left and the social movements and that I stress this each time I have the opportunity to express myself. I am radically opposed to any classic politician's attitude of the type "Vote for me and I'll do the rest", which leads directly into the social democratic impasse.

Secondly, it is clear that having been elected as a deputy, I have a larger audience and thus more possibilities to spread my ideas which would otherwise have a smaller audience. From this viewpoint, the outgoing parliamentary group has done some good work in the previous parliament. It has placed in the area of public debate questions which would otherwise have remained much more marginal. I think, for example, of the minimum wage and the war in Afghanistan.

This activity oriented to public opinion is one thing, but it is just as important for me to do serious parliamentary work. One can wonder how far the parliamentary possibilities of transforming society go in a system where economic power seems to have more importance than the power legitimately and democratically elected through the ballot box, but independently of this question, it is the task of left parliamentarians to go to the end of these limits to test them.

The Die Linke parliamentary group has 76 members, 40 of them women. For the first time, a majority of its deputies come from the western L nder. It should be said that as a rule the western lists are more open to a plurality of views than those in the east. Overall this new parliamentary group should have the same political orientation as the previous one. Some representatives of the left wing from the western L nder have now appeared, whereas the wing which subordinates the horizon of a new left to the winning of “red-red-green” parliamentary majorities has also been strengthened. Of the 76 deputies, 35 are new.

Friedrich Dorn: At the first working meeting of the parliamentary group, a ten point programme was unanimously adopted. What is the content of this programme and what do you think of it?

Andrej Hunko: The goal of this ten point programme was to fix the contours of our first initiatives in the Bundestag. It has a symbolic limited value and obviously does not replace the programme on which we were elected. For me what is decisive is that there is no challenge to the demand for withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan, nor programmatic adaptation to a declining SPD. That has not happened, to that extent I am satisfied and I voted in favour.

However, the fact the significant demand to increase the minimum allocation to 500 euros does not appear in this programme poses a problem. I have since been assured that this demand would be taken up in the next budget

debate, as the parliamentary group does every year. Despite that it would have been preferable if this demand was present. In any case I draw the lesson that the critical deputies of Die Linke should better prepare and organise to avoid such incidents in the future.

Friedrich Dorn: Oskar Lafontaine did not wish to remain as chair of the parliamentary group. How do you interpret that?

Andrej Hunko: That was a real surprise. The fact that he abandoned this function is linked to the demand for a mixed co-presidency at the head of the party and the parliamentary group: Gregor Gysi was to lead the parliamentary group with a woman of western origin, while Lafontaine would lead the party with a woman from the east. In principle it is a good thing, and it is necessary to introduce quotas at the head of the party also, now that this has been imposed for all functions at other levels.

Obviously this demand only has meaning if those chosen are really representative of the different character of the party structures in east and west. If such is the case, the co-president of the parliamentary group should reflect the western party's more rebellious, trade union and social movement oriented character.

It is interesting that on the very day the news of Lafontaine's stepping down was announced, the right wing of the party continued to tell the media that differences between east and west had disappeared, which removed the necessity of a co-presidency of the parliamentary group. It is about preventing the western party, which is more to the left, being represented at this level.

This example shows to what point Lafontaine's withdrawal carries the danger of seeing the parliamentary group slide rightwards. The left deputies will have a lot to do to stop this drift.

Friedrich Dorn: What are the electorate's expectations of the party and its deputies? What type of pressure will Die Linke undergo from other parties and how should it respond?

Andrej Hunko: It is still hard to interpret the expectations of the voters. Die Linke's electoral campaign was essentially based around clear slogans, like "Vote for us to get rid of Hartz IV!" (the name given to the package of laws attacking social benefits), "No to retirement at 67!", "Out of Afghanistan!". Die Linke was the only party which led a campaign with this content.

For me, what our electorate expects is that we concretise our demands, and create maximum pressure to make them a reality. If Die Linke should abandon these positions, the party has no purpose.

As to pressure from other parties, it takes varied forms. The CDU and FDP rely above all on demonization and the anti-communist reflexes which are particularly strong in Germany. The SPD and Greens demand primarily that we abandon our positions on Europe and peace. They basically use the argument that we are "Europhobes". They make approval of all the militarist aspects of the Treaty of Lisbon a central question.

Friedrich Dorn: What debates are there in the party on "red-red-green" majorities in the L ander and nationally? And what is your opinion?

Andrej Hunko: To be honest, we should note that the debates on governmental participation are not especially vibrant. Thus the second legislature of the red-red coalition (SPD-Die Linke) in Berlin has led to much less discussion than the first, between 2002 and 2006. In the party as a whole, there are few debates on possible participation in the

regional governments in Thuringia and the Saar. Similarly, there are few polemics on the preliminary talks around an SPD-Die Linke coalition in the Land of Brandenburg.

At the national level, governmental participation is ruled out for now. For it to become thinkable, the party must impose on its members the principle of approval of military interventions. There are regular attempts in this direction, there will be again in the future. Some in the party employ all their energy to create conditions which will render possible a coalition government in 2013, at the next Bundestag elections.

I disagree with them totally. "Antikapitalistische Linke" is structured around "red lines" which cannot be crossed by a governmental participation. First there is our opposition to attacks on social benefits, to privatisation, to Hartz IV and to military intervention. If we observe these criteria, we will avoid the worst of what happened for example in the case of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy.

In the light of the current relationship of forces in Germany, I find that participation in governmental coalitions smacks of adventure. But the problem is expressing this in a language which people can understand, because in the end, among those who identify with Die Linke, many want the right wing government kicked out and replaced, especially in North Rhine-Westphalia next spring. So we must make our viewpoint understood by fixing concrete criteria which would suppose a deep change in orientation by the SPD and Greens... which is highly unlikely.

Rather than pondering governmental combinations, Die Linke should invest its energy in setting up broad coalitions of social resistance to the offensive of capital. On this level of culture politics in Germany is very backward. The first thing is to be capable of modifying the social relationship of forces and to breach the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism which continues its domination.

One of the key ideas of those in the party who advocate governmental coalitions is that in Germany a left socialist party can only remain in the minority and so it is necessary to move towards the SPD and Green. I don't see it like that. The last elections showed clearly that Die Linke could enlarge its electoral potential significantly, despite the violent attacks from the media. In recent weeks, the percentage des gens saying they could possibly vote for Die Linke has gone from 19% to 27%. So some taboos have been breached. Nothing stops us from thinking that this percentage could again grow significantly.

The task of the hour is to transform this feeling into votes, political activity, participation in the movements and, finally in changing the relationship of forces within society. So much more becomes possible than will be the case if there is participation in a government to rescue capitalism.

Friedrich Dorn: What do you expect in the coming months and what will be decisive?

Andrej Hunko: For me as a member of Die Linke in North Rhine-Westphalia, the elections to the regional parliament on May 9, 2010 will be of crucial importance. More than 20% of the German population lives in this Land. The left wing of the party is particularly strong there. For the evolution and future orientation of the party, a success (that is, entry into the Landtag) will be decisive. So we must succeed.

In terms of extra-parliamentary activities, I think the actions planned for early December against the extension of the Afghanistan war are extremely important. Then it is important to see how actions of resistance to the crisis develop, above all when layoff plans are announced. The new government is still hesitating to make the population feel the full weight of the crisis. But it could happen at any time. United anti-crisis fronts involving unions, social movements and left organisations should be set up in the coming weeks.

Last and certainly not least, there is the Copenhagen climate summit in December. In Germany in particular, where links between ecologist movements and anti-capitalists have loosened, we must work to restore them.

Friedrich Dorn: To conclude, a question on the European dimension. You followed the two referendums in Ireland, could you comment on them?

Andrej Hunko: I was in France on May 29, 2005 when the treaty on the European constitution was rejected, I was also in Ireland on June 12, 2008 and October 2, 2009 during the votes on the Treaty of Lisbon. For me, the whole procedure by which this treaty has been put in place has been monstrous.

In France, the treaty was rejected above all because of its neoliberal orientation and also its militarist aspects. Some weeks later, the Dutch confirmed this rejection. Yet this did not lead to the elaboration of a new treaty with a different orientation. Formal modifications were introduced to avoid referendums in most countries. Only in Ireland was a referendum necessary.

All the controversial points of the old draft treaty, like the neoliberal orientation or the obligation to contribute to military efforts, remained unchanged. In Ireland the treaty was also rejected in 2008. But this new rejection did not influence the convictions of the EU élites, who subjected the Irish population to threats and an intense blackmail and imposed a new vote. The fear of being completely disconnected from the rest of Europe led the Irish population to vote for it this time, which means that the treaty will now enter into force.

The treaty of Lisbon will render the struggle for a social, peaceful and democratic Europe more difficult. Also the way it has been done sheds light on the ruling circles of this Europe, particularly on their will to make the EU a neoliberal military union at any price.

The left and socialist forces should make it known more broadly, as clearly as possible, that this road does not lead to the European integration of the peoples, but to the formation of an imperial bloc heavy with danger. Nobody should approve of this.