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Germany

North Rhine-Westphalia: crucial regional election

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In May 2010 Die Linke in North Rhine-Westphalia crossed the threshold of 5% and, with 5.6% of the votes, entered into the Land parliament of the western German state with the biggest population of all the L nder. Now this parliament is dissolved, and there will be new elections on May 13, 2012.

In 2010, it was a significant success for several reasons. First, for Die Linke at the federal level it was a sizeable gain in surmounting its relative weakness in the west of the country. Secondly, Die Linke in North Rhine-Westphalia, with strong anti-capitalist and left reformist currents and with a significant influence from groups of revolutionary background, is situated to the left within Die Linke and represents an alternative orientation to the co-governmentalism prevalent in the east of the country.

After the entry into the Landtag, Die Linke in North Rhine-Westphalia was confronted with a specific situation. With 11 deputies (six of them women) out of a total 181, the Die Linke fraction was in opposition to an SPD/Green minority government, supported by only 90 deputies, the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP also being in opposition.

This meant a permanent challenge, because every decision, every "yes" or "No" and every abstention could decide if a motion " " and even a budget " " of the governmental fractions passed or not. On the one hand, this made parliament interesting " " it was a long way from the normal routine, where everything is decided in advance by the leaderships of the governmental fractions under the lead of the government, and where debates take on a ritual character. On the other hand, this situation incited the fraction of Die Linke to concentrate more than anticipated on the debates and elaborations of position at different levels of parliamentary activity " " although this was done in close collaboration with the DGB trade unions and the other extra-parliamentary social movements, and the party and its fraction attempted to participate in mobilisations, notably in the anti-nuclear mobilisations and social protest.

The SPD and the Greens had begun a left turn, prudent and relative but real, to distance themselves from the ferocious anti-social politics of Schr der/Fischer and "Agenda 2010", which had led to a significant electoral crisis for the SPD. That is why in 2010 and 2011 the SPD and Greens were responsive to the pressure of Die Linke's demands. They were ready to realise some social and democratic progress in the name of a policy of "social prevention" and they have not presented neoliberal shock budgets, knowing that Die Linke would not accept measures of social dismantling or staff reductions in the public services, or new orgies of privatisation.

Thus the Die Linke fraction accepted the election of Hannelore Kraft (SPD) as minister-president (head of government) as well as the adoption of the 2010 and 2011 budgets by abstaining, and voted for a certain number of positive, albeit often insufficient, decisions of a progressive nature. Some examples: abrogation of fees for university studies; abrogation of notes for behaviour ("Kopfnoten") in the schools; reintroduction of more participation by staff representatives in decisions in the public sector ("Mitbestimmung") ; introduction of a law fixing social and ecological criteria and fidelity to collective rates for company access to public tenders ("Tariftreue und Vergabegesetz") ; abrogation of the residence requirement for asylum seekers ("Residenzpflicht f r Fl chtlinge") ; introduction of the possibility of recalling mayors by popular vote and better conditions for citizens' initiatives in the communes ; a renewable energy supply project for the Land's buildings.

But the SPD and Greens were preparing a new turn. Together with the CDU and against the votes of Die Linke, they voted for a billion extra euros for the Land WestLB bank, bankrupt because of its participation in the casino of the financial markets, and this without perspectives for the staff and without the participation of private creditors, while turning a deaf ear to the demands of Die Linke for an audit of the debts of WestLB and the Land acting as guarantor

for the bank.

For the schools, the SPD and Greens concluded a phony agreement with the CDU, betraying the promises made before the elections of May 2010. Only Die Linke continued to fight for a single school system providing common instruction to all pupils up to the 10th class level. And for the communes, the SPD and Greens, this time with the support of the FDP, decided on a “Greek style” mechanism, forcing communes running deficits to take brutal austerity measures to gain access to supplementary financial aid of the Land (“Stärkungspakt”).

Very late, in March 2012, the governmental fractions presented a 2012 budget which, among other things, reduced the resources for school and kindergarten meals. Ideologically, the debate turned around the budgetary discipline. The fraction and party of Die Linke (which in North Rhine-Westphalia, take all significant decisions together, and are proud of the fact) had fixed minimums for abstention which would have passed the budget of the minority government and had indicated clearly that they would vote against if the SPD and Greens were not ready for substantial concessions in relation to Die Linke's four central demands:

- 1) a “social ticket” of 15 euros per month for access to public transport in the Land (“Landesweites Sozialticket für 15 Euro”);
- 2) Adequate financing for the communes (392 communes out of 400 are running deficits in the Land);
- 3) A new effort to make decent housing available to families and individuals on low incomes (“Sozialer Wohnungsbau”);
- 4) Good day-care places to be assured for children under three (there is currently a shortfall of more than 100,000 in the Land).

The SPD and Greens were not ready for any concession on these demands, even if it would have been possible to grant the essence of them without going beyond the limits constitutionally fixed for Land indebtedness. The FDP was ready to pass the budget on the third and final vote, but had announced it would vote no on the second vote. At this time, a dubious legal opinion from the administration of the Landtag stipulated that the rejection of the second vote would mean the defeat of the draft budget of the governmental fractions (dubious, because the law gives the government the possibility of self-correction up until the third vote). The FDP being unable to change course so quickly and, Die Linke remaining firm, the draft budget was rejected with 90 votes for (SPD and Greens) and 91 against (CDU, FDP and Die Linke): Hannelore Kraft then immediately presented the motion of dissolution of the parliament and new elections within eight weeks. The motion was adopted with 100% of the votes.

Taking a somewhat more complete balance sheet of nearly two years of minority government, we should add the central aspect of energy policy. The Constitution of North Rhine-Westphalia imposes the socialisation of enterprises enjoying a monopolistic position or abusing their economic power (article 27). This law was introduced after the second world war, with the aim of blocking the processes that had largely contributed to bringing Hitler and the Nazis to power. Of course, the official policy feigns ignorance of these articles. although they would seem to apply very well to the case of the big energy monopolies RWE and E.ON, who prevent a turn towards 100% renewable energy and who extract monopolistic super profits with an anti-social and anti-ecological price policy.

Die Linke has campaigned to socialise, re-communalise, decentralise and democratise the energy economy and for a plan of ecological and social restructuring of industrial society. And it advanced the demand for a publicly owned high voltage electric transport network in the Land.

But the SPD and the Greens have rejected even this modest proposal in favour of an offer to purchase the network of RWE "Amprion" that would render the conglomerate formally independent, so that a private concern would become owner of the network.

On energy prices, Die Linke has denounced and continues to denounce the fact that those who consume the most (in particular industry) pay the least, while private households on modest incomes pay the bulk of the energy bill, and hundreds of thousands of those on the lowest incomes are victims of or are threatened with power cuts and are excluded from a significant aspect of elementary participation in social life.

That is why Die Linke demands the free consumption of a basic stock of electric power financed by progressive rates linked to incomes and the abrogation of the gifts made to the big companies.

Die Linke in North Rhine-Westphalia has begun the electoral struggle, updating its 2010 programme and drawing up a shortened version ("Kurzwahlprogramm") published as a leaflet (see the PDF version on the Internet, on the party website).

The party has reselected as candidates for its list presented on May 13th the 12 who headed the list in 2010 (and thus the 11 outgoing deputies), with one exception: at the head of the list there is now Katharina Schwabedissen, a nurse aged 39, who had been one of the two party spokespersons until now. Thus there are seven female candidates of the eleven heading the list.

It is not certain that Die Linke will cross the threshold of 5% needed for parliamentary representation. In the polls at the federal level, the party has lost a few points, and at the level of the Land it is currently oscillating around 4%. One of the reasons for this is the spectacular electoral rise of the "Pirate Party" which campaigns for "internet freedom" while remaining fuzzy on economic and social questions, but which has succeeded in presenting itself as a new force, promising to render political processes more transparent, and captures a good number of protest votes.

For Die Linke, it is a decisive battle. On May 6th in Schleswig Holstein, and May 13th in North Rhine-Westphalia we will see if the party can maintain its presence on the political chessboard of the west or not. And if the party is defeated in North Rhine-Westphalia, that will be a bad sign for the federal elections in June 2012, and a considerable weakening of the left currents inside the party.