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Germany

Anti Nuclear Movement: Stronger than ever - weaker than before?

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The movement against the nuclear plants has been one of the biggest mass movements of the 1970s and 80s in Germany. After a slowdown in the last 20 years, it has reappeared now like a phoenix from the ashes. Whilst in other European countries unemployment and social cuts are provoking protests and resistance, in Germany nuclear power or, rather, environmental questions are in the centre of the present mobilizations. What are the reasons?

A short history of anti-nuclear movement in Germany

In the Fifties and Sixties the movement against Nuclear Death focused mainly on the military use of Nuclear energy. It was promoted mainly by the German Communist party and its allies, and a layer of left trade-unionists and Social Democrats.

The movement against the civil use of nuclear energy emerged in the Seventies. The first big battle was won in Southern Germany: a group of 27 wine growers protested against the construction of a nuclear plant in their region, near the French border. The local population on both sides of the border, an alliance of environmentalists, local wine-growers and the radical left, joined the resistance, the construction site was occupied in 1974 and after years of struggle today the spot is a natural reserve.

This first success was the start of a nationwide movement with huge manifestations, militant battles around numerous construction sites (including cross-border actions like the fight against the fast breeder in Crey-Malville, where in 1977 the teacher Vital Michalon was murdered by the police) and especially around the village of Gorleben, where it was planned to dump the nuclear waste in a salt dome. Almost all groups of the radical left joined in and at least the foundation of the Green Party at the end of the Seventies was to a big extent the result of this movement, which united bourgeois (and sometimes even right-wing) environmentalists, radical leftists and left trade-unionists.

While the big trades unions first supported the use of Nuclear Energy, in the Eighties the wind changed. After the catastrophe of Chernobyl, first the Public-Services Union, and later on the Metal Workers Union changed their mind and since 1986 in all polls a stable majority of the population has voted for abandoning this technology. Since then no new plant has been planned or built, and because of the strong resistance, the plan to install a fuel reprocessing plant in the village of Wackersdorf/Bavaria was abandoned. Even the Social Democrats in their party congress of 1986 decided to abandon Nuclear Power.

Starting from 1995, when the first transports of nuclear waste to Gorleben took place, there was a slow, but continuous new growth of resistance, with demonstrations and (mostly peaceful) blockades of the railway.

The "exit-plans"

When the 16 years of conservative government ended in 1998, a coalition between Social Democrats and Green Party came to power. How far in the meantime the Green party had integrated itself into the ruling system, rapidly became obvious. First the Greens agreed to the war against Serbia, and then to a foul compromise respecting the

exit from Nuclear energy. A life-span extension for the existing plants was decided with a time frame, to shut down the plants step by step. But the respecting law was constructed in a way that the current government of Liberals and Conservatives easily could modify it.

So in 2010 the new government of Conservatives and Liberals decided another extension of life span for the plants. But when the respective plans were published, the result was a sudden and unexpected new uprising of the anti-nuclear movement: In April 2010 a human chain of 120 km length was formed between two plants in Northern Germany, 150 000 people took part. The blockades of the nuclear waste-transport in autumn 2010 were the biggest and most popular ones for more than ten years. And in March 2011, just one day after the disaster of Fukushima, another 60 000 people formed a human chain between two reactors in Southern Germany.

And the mobilizations became bigger and bigger. Throughout the country there were local and regional demonstrations, actions, vigils with altogether 160 000 people, and the result was striking: The Federal Government of chancellor Angela Merkel performed a classical back salto.

Fukushima and the consequences

When the disaster in the Fukushima plant became obvious, the regional elections in the state of Baden-Württemberg, ruled for 60 years by the Conservatives, took place. And the polls showed, that the opposition most probably would win. So, the week before, a magic change of consciousness happened to Chancellor Merkel. On Sunday evening she still stated that the German nuclear plants are completely safe - the next morning she announced the immediate shut-down of seven units, the oldest ones, for at least three months and installed an "ethics" commission, to give recommendations respecting an exit scenario.

But it did not help: the Conservatives lost the election and the Green Party first time in history became the strongest force in the regional government and now is ruling in a coalition with the Social Democrats as junior partner.

In the meantime there exists a proposal for an exit strategy, but again the content is dubious. All plants will be closed by 2022 at the latest, but the demand of the movement, to close down all plants at once, is not even taken in consideration. Nor is there anything respecting the research reactors, which are still running. The government at the moment is trying to come to a consensus with the opposition respecting the exit plan. Green party and Social Democrats on the other hand are in a precarious position. Everything, the current government now is proposing, could have been done already ten years ago by the former Social Democrats/Green government, but was not. And now they are demanding much a faster exit than they had planned during their time in government....

A new generation

If one looks to the present demonstrations, it is obvious that a new generation of antinuclear activists is appearing on the spot. On the one hand, among the participants are to a certain extent the "old" activists - still active or reactivated - of the 1970s and 80s, but there are just as many young people below 30, who increasingly are taking over the initiative. Already now the present movement is the biggest one for decades. And it is not only an exclusively anti-nuclear. The question of environmental pollution, including the fight against Climate Change, is one of the subjects, under focus, and also the problem of individual and collective transport. The above-mentioned elections in Baden-Württemberg, for instance, were also influenced heavily by a local struggle against the construction of a new railway station in the regional capital, Stuttgart, which is being fought by a broad coalition of environmentalists and

social activists, as well as the nuclear question,

Strengths and weaknesses

The strength of the actual movement is its unity and the fact that it is rooted in all layers of the population. This is the reason, why the present government performed this abrupt turnaround. Already before Fukushima the question of nuclear power was an important one in German politics, but it had barely an impact on elections. This changed: no pro-nuclear party in Germany can win elections at the moment.

But on the other hand the movement is quite informal. The new layer of young activists is taking part in action and is organizing quite innovative events - but the general political level of consciousness is quite low, and the will, to organize and to build up permanent structures, committees etc. either. This is a big difference to the movement of the seventies, when the radical left was a leading force in the political discourse and was able to organize around the campaigns.

But the movement is not over: the mobilizations against the foul compromise, the government is presenting, are continuing. Its up to the forces of the radical left, to use this opportunity, to present a credible alternative to the ruling system and its disastrous environmental and social policies.