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Germany

New challenges, new chances

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Taken together, the demonstrations that took place in Berlin, Cologne and Stuttgart on April 3, 2004 constituted the biggest street mobilization on a social theme since the foundation of the federal republic, of a comparable size to the big pacifist demonstrations of the 1980s. Such a mobilization is bound to have consequences. Angela Klein examines the role that the social movements have played in this swift about-turn, and the prospects for new political developments.

End of a system

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359121.jpg>]

Only a year ago, it seemed impossible that any kind of large-scale resistance would see the light of day. On March 14, 2003 chancellor Gerhard Schröder predicted “blood, sweat and tears” in a speech “to the nation”, There would be sharp and sustained cuts in unemployment benefit and a challenge to the health system and the right to work unseen since the end of the war. The unions criticized the speech but they limited themselves to verbal protests, although the chancellor had just broken the electoral pledges he had made only six months earlier. In summer 2002, in the midst of the electoral campaign, the leaders of IG Metall and Ver.di [1] agreed to participate in the Hartz Commission, [2] thus accepting its legitimacy, on the express condition that levels of unemployment benefit should not be reduced. Six months later Schröder proclaimed the reduction of the period of payment of unemployment benefit and the suppression of aid to the unemployed.

His speech unleashed a wave of austerity measures at the federal level, in the Länder and in the municipalities, with reductions in social budgets and expenditure on training, culture and all public institutions. The population has thus suffered a triple attack, with suppression of protection against unemployment, growth of job insecurity and privatization of public services.

The Schröder speech meant the end of a system. At first there were many who could not imagine it. The unions did everything to try, as usual, to convince the SPD through informal conversations. The demonstration called by Ver.di against “reform” of the health system, May 1, and the regional mobilizations of the DGB [3] a week later tried again to avoid an open conflict. Hardly astonishing then that they were not heavily supported, A demonstration called on June 1 in Berlin, on the eve of the SPD special congress called to underwrite the policy already decided on by Schröder, only attracted 1,000 people despite the support of several Berlin unions.

New potential

It was only when the chancellor, during this congress, deliberately snubbed Michael Sommer, the main leader of the DGB, that the leaders and middle cadres of the unions became conscious that “their political partner was lost”. This tardy recognition nonetheless led to the paralysis of the union movement for some months and the impetus for the big demonstration on November 1 did not come from the union, but rather from the unemployed, the anti-Hertz alliances and the radical left.

In September 2003 a wave of protests began at the local and regional levels involving the police, pensioners and the social movements. On September 24 in Düsseldorf a demonstration attracted 30,000 people, while in Wiesbaden on

November 18 (a working day!) more than 50,000 people participated. All in all, in September and October 2003 there were around 30 big mobilizations.

On November 1, a national gathering called in Berlin in a largely improvised manner attracted around 100,000 - the majority came from Berlin and had spontaneously joined the march as it passed. A new potential had just appeared - let's summarize some of its characteristics.

Rupture with social democracy

The popular identification with a "friendly" government has disappeared, along with popular patience. A poll after the mobilizations of April 3 showed that two thirds of the population was unhappy with the federal government. The wave of resistance did not manifest itself only in demonstrations; inside the unions a profound process of reorientation has begun while certain local congresses of the SPD have witnessed violent confrontations. The protests did not merely target the policies of the federal government. In Hamburg, Bremen and Berlin initiatives for referendums have begun against the threatened privatization of hospitals; in Berlin a petition has circulated in favour of a referendum to reject the regional budget adopted by the senate which has an SPD-PDS majority. In the communes the consequences of the austerity policy are more immediately visible.

In the last 12 months the SPD has lost 100,000 members and experienced a series of electoral defeats. In the year to come the SPD faces a dozen elections and it is not necessary to be a prophet to say they will go badly.

Faced with the mass mobilizations the government has remained obdurate, with its spokespersons repeating that there was no alternative and that the CDU would be even worse. But this has ceased to scare people. They are beginning to understand the need to seek an alternative outside the parties presently represented in the Bundestag.

However the government has also begun to understand that it cannot continue its aggressions until the next federal elections. Nonetheless it wants to finish what it has already begun. It has experienced great bureaucratic difficulties with the unemployment benefit which has replaced the previous aid to the unemployed and debate continues on whether the communes or the new federal agency for employment should pay for this benefit. It is likely that immobility will please nobody, neither the employers nor the employees.

Towards a new political force?

The conviction that the SPD has crossed the Rubicon and that it is no longer possible to return it to its old ways is gaining ground. This has already had two consequences:

First, the idea that it is necessary to build an electoral alternative to the SPD for the 2006 elections. The "Wahlalternative 2006" (Electoral Alternative 2006) is thus supported by some regional leaderships of the Ver.di federation, by circles around the monthly "Sozialismus" and the Keynesian economists of the Memorandum group.

Parallel to this IG Metall in Bavaria has established the Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice ("Initiative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit"). Its best-known member is Klaus Ernst, who was candidate to the vice-presidency of the union last October and who was just beaten by Berthold Huber, a right-winger from Bade-Wurtemberg.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359131.jpg>]

On June 6 the two initiatives, as well as all those who are interested in this project, are to meet in Berlin at a common congress to debate the preparation of 2006. Until now their theme has been “ We want to bring back our old SPD”. But it's an illusion. History will not go backwards. Any electoral initiative which puts itself outside the framework of neoliberal politics has to take account of the new conditions, such as the growth of insecurity in living conditions, the necessity of a trade union reorientation, the critique of globalization and the movement around it, massive long term unemployment, the extension of the European Union eastwards and its social consequences. It should also respond to an old and still relevant question. How should political effectiveness be measured? By activity in the framework of existing institutions or by the construction of a social subject?

For the moment the union full timers with SPD membership cards who have decided to show their disaffection are going down a road whose ultimate direction is unknown to them. A procedure of exclusion from the party is underway against them. It doesn't bother them and only serves to discredit the SPD leadership. Broader activist sectors of the left and far left are attracted by the project and expect to influence it.

Despite all its weaknesses, it should be stressed that this is the first attempt since the creation of the federal republic to create a left political formation on the basis of a social question and originating from the heart of the workers' movement. It is not a question of reviving an old party but rather an attempt to create a new one. That will also have an impact on the social movement.

Social and trade union renewal

The development of the social movement is at least as interesting. Since the “agreement for jobs” [4] has foundered for the second time and the unions deplore openly the “loss of the political partner”, the question of how to shape future demands is naturally on the agenda. One of the responses to this question is the construction of broad social fronts, capable of mobilizing the masses and exerting extra-parliamentary pressure. Such unitary frameworks have appeared in many towns, big and small; sometimes through regional social alliances, sometimes through social forums and sometimes through trade union initiatives. In particular, Ver.di has played an active role (with regional differentiation). The struggle against “Agenda 2010” is not the only factor; there is also opposition to privatization at the municipal level, demands for a decent minimum income for the unemployed, wage struggles and defence of working conditions. The challenge to collective bargaining in the public services in the Lander constitutes the next provocation that the social movement faces. The regional labour ministers want to extend working time from 38.5 hours per week currently to 41 or indeed 42.

The mobilization of November 1, 2003 was prepared essentially by the forces of the radical left; while that of April 3 saw the conjuncture of the efforts of the DGB apparatus and the radical and union lefts, the unemployed organizations and ATTAC. After April 3 there is a desire to keep this framework of action as a structure that allows the union leaderships to act independently. Simultaneously the preparations for the first German Social Forum in June 2005 have begun - this should attract at least 10,000 people and could become a fantastic point of crystallization of alternative structures of resistance.

Meanwhile, activist congresses have been organized to debate the orientation of the social movement. Thus in mid-May an assembly was called at the initiative of Ver.di, integrating the round table of the unemployed movements and ATTAC. It is a characteristic example of the recent evolution of the collaboration between the union sectors and the social movements. Discussion continues on the organizational questions of mobilization but also the search for common responses on questions like a guaranteed minimum income and the right to work. The movement of the social forums - most of all the European Social Forum - has been a precious source of dynamism. Many “walls”

have fallen, which is perhaps the most important gain of the new movement.

The mobilization of April 3 has thus given a new impulsion to the movement and opened new perspectives, unthinkable just one year ago. That will not last forever, a window for action has opened the prospect of the fall of the SPD-Green government. And this could happen before the elections anticipated for 2006.

[1] IG Metall, the metalworkers union federation has for a long time been the biggest federation in Germany, although the newly created Ver.di is bigger.

[2] The Hartz Commission, named after the head of personnel at Volkswagen (who in the past negotiated a number of compromises on working time with IG Metall), was set up by the Schröder government to “modernize” industrial relations.

[3] The DGB is the only union confederation in Germany, historically closely linked to the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

[4] Bündnis für Arbeit (Agreement for Jobs) was the name of a social pact which was the principal theme of the SPD electoral campaign in 1998.