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Germany

# The Beginnings of a Political Alternative to Neo-Liberalism

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**As everyone knows, under Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, the SPD-Green government is conducting a policy of systematically dismantling social conquests on the pretext of the "painful but necessary reform" of the social benefits system; a policy of privatising public services, social insurance and mutual societies; a harsh policy of upward distribution of income. This is accompanied by a brutal offensive on the part of big capital, aimed at reducing real wages and imposing longer working hours without corresponding wage increases.**

## The Offensive of Capital

The measure known as "Hartz IV", which will be implemented from January 2005, has lit the fuse. Peter Hartz, personnel manager of Volkswagen, was appointed by the government to head a commission (known as the "Hartz Commission") responsible for devising measures aimed officially at reducing unemployment. The measures Hartz I, II and III seek to increase the pressure on the unemployed to get them to accept any job at any price. They "reform" the public body that deals with the unemployed into a collection of "agencies" which are supposed to get everyone back to work. "Hartz IV" merges the second-class unemployment benefit

(Arbeitslosenhilfe - a benefit that is considerably less than the "first-class" Arbeitslosengeld and is conditional on proof of "need") with the Sozialhilfe (the lowest rate of benefit, officially designed to keep people out of dire poverty) to produce Arbeitslosengeld II. The result will be a million more people living below the poverty line, including many children.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Hartz4.jpg>]

Anti-Hartz demonstration in Berlin

On November 1, 2003, everyone was taken by surprise by the number of demonstrators in Berlin, in view of the passivity of all the union leaderships, at least at the highest levels: 100,000 people, of whom about 30,000 were mobilised by militant trade unionists or by local leaders and middle-level union bodies, the rest being mobilised by the anti-capitalist Left, divided among several small organisations, by ATTAC, by the small social movements, etc. The union leaderships, so as not to be outflanked, reacted by preparing a large united mobilisation for April 3, 2004: on that occasion 500,000 people came into the streets in Berlin, Stuttgart and Cologne. Finally at the end of July and the beginning of August 2004, there was the explosion of the movement of "Monday demonstrations", [1] which appeared on the fringes of the traditional organisations, especially in the East of Germany, but also in nearly 200 towns and cities in the West, although with noticeably fewer people taking part. The top leaderships of the major unions remained very passive, returning to the road of an understanding with the SPD leadership and therefore with the government, obtaining purely cosmetic changes in the law known as "Hartz IV".

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Hartz1.jpg>]

The year 2004 also brought the beginning of a change in the political landscape, a beginning of differentiation in Social Democracy and in the union apparatus, although it is only at a very early stage and its programmatic content is pretty weak. This is the birth of Wahlalternative - an electoral alternative - seeking to create a political force that breaks with New Labour-style neo-liberalism under Schroeder's leadership. This reflects, among other things, the growing need of a certain layer of unionists to break with the traditional "symbiosis" with the SPD, because it has become increasingly difficult to justify this loyal relationship to the union rank and file. All the more so since on the wages front, the trade union movement has been on the defensive for along time, is in crisis and is losing many members every year. For its part the SPD is also losing members - 300,000 over the least few years.

## Differentiations in the workers' movement

It is the first time that Social Democrats linked to the trade union/workers' movement have not just dropped out individually but are trying to launch an alternative.

For various reasons, the PDS [2] is not very credible as a political alternative, especially because it shares responsibility for neo-liberal policies at regional level where it is a junior partner in coalitions with the SPD, as in Berlin and in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Furthermore it has never succeeded in developing in the West of the country.

At the beginning of 2004, two initiatives appeared, posing the problem of challenging on a political level the governing (in alliance with the Greens) Social Democracy: the "Electoral Alternative 2006" and the "Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice". The notion of "jobs" (Arbeit) could also be translated as "work" or "working people". It expresses the search for answers to the problem of mass long-term unemployment, which is a major factor in the erosion of the standard of living of millions of workers, as well as contributing to the change in the relationship of forces between labour and capital, to the advantage of the latter.

The two initiatives come from two different politico-social backgrounds, which have however, some common features. In the "Electoral alternative 2006" (the date of the next federal elections, which will take place towards the end of that year) there are roughly speaking three components. On the one hand, there are members or ex-members of the PDS who more or less formed part of the left opposition to participation in regional governments under SPD leadership and to the adaptation of the PDS to the mechanisms and to the general consensus of official politics in the framework of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. On the other hand, there are intellectuals, some of them university professors, who are partisans of an alternative economic policy to neo-liberalism, especially in the sense of a return to Keynesianism (even though these intellectuals define themselves as "socialists" or even "Marxists"). The third layer is made up of trade unionists, often with local or middle-level responsibilities in the apparatuses of the large service union (Ver.di) or other unions such as the small teachers' union (GEW). The journal Sozialismus and Express, a small monthly aimed at trade unionists, with a reformist socialist orientation and which argues in favour of trade union policies that are more militant than the official leaderships', are the references for this current.

The milieu of the "Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice" is more local and narrower. It involves trade union militants from IG-Metall who occupy leading positions at a local and middle level in the North of the Land of Bavaria (Bayern). They were all long-standing members of the SPD. In the beginning, they seemed rather to want to exert pressure on the SPD-Green government, to make it change its policies, brandishing the threat of a possible new party, but without really wanting to launch one. It was the SPD apparatus in Bavaria that forced the pace by threatening to expel the initiators from the party. They were brought before a disciplinary body, where they asked to be allowed to present their opinions and their positions collectively. The Bavarian SPD leadership reacted harshly, replying that it was not a question of political positions but of infringing the statutes of the party and that the accused would have to appear individually to reply to the disciplinary charges. It was only then, in April 2004, that the initiators of the "Initiative for Jobs and Social justice" decided not to bow down before the apparatus of the SPD and to launch the perspective of a new party - essentially one that would go back to the positions of the old SPD: defence of the Welfare State, of social conquests and the interests of the workers, a policy seeking to significantly reduce the level of unemployment.

## The First Debates

On June 20, 2004, the two initiatives came together to create from the "Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice" (WAsG, from its German initials). The initiators chose the form of an association and announced that this association could launch the process of creating a new party, under certain conditions (especially that the number of members of the association was sufficient).

A first public meeting in Berlin at the end of June attracted 700 people. The political and social composition of this meeting was subsequently confirmed at local level and in regional meetings: a large majority of male trade union militants aged between 35 and 55, especially from IG-Metall and Ver.di, with a Social Democratic past. A small minority came from the Greens or the PDS. Young people coming from the movement against neo-liberal globalisation are fairly rare in the WAsG. Another small minority is made up of militants of the small organisations of the German anti-capitalist Left. At the public meeting in Berlin the stands of the SAV, [3] Linksruck [4] and the ISL were particularly visible.

Over and above the protest against the anti-social policies of the government - a policy "not against unemployment, but against the unemployed" exclaimed Klaus Ernst, leader of IG-Metall in Schweinfurt in Bavaria and main leader of the WAsG, to loud applause from the audience - and the reformist or anti-capitalist declarations of some participants, there was a militant and convincing speech from Bernard Riexinger, leader of Ver.di in Stuttgart, who wound up the meeting by evoking a probable consensus of everyone around concrete propositions: "Instead of unpaid increased working hours, reduction of working hours without loss of wages; instead of the progressive dismantling the Welfare State, defence and extension of social conquests; instead of the steadily spreading orgy of privatisations, public services and high-level social security; instead of continuing redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, financing of social and human progress of society by the reintroduction of the Wealth Tax and by progressive taxation of high incomes!". The unanimous approval of the audience was expressed in its applause.

Another debate, which appeared on the horizon before and during the Berlin meeting, concerned democracy in the WAsG and in the future party. A certain number of leaders were tempted (and still are) to not allow in the members of the small organisations of the anti-capitalist Left and they expressed this by referring to "sectarianism" and "extremism". We argued (and we still do) in favour of a plurality of opinions and currents in the new party and especially against the marginalisation or exclusion of the anti-capitalist elements. We did so for two reasons: first of all, nobody has all the ready-made answers to the problems of the 21st century and to the necessary renewal of the workers' movement and the political Left. Secondly, if the leadership and the majority of the WAsG or of the new party remain intransigent as far as immediate demands are concerned, and do not let themselves be drawn towards adaptation to the institutions by participating in neo-liberal governments, it is difficult to imagine them radicalising their positions concerning the capitalist system. So we have to try to have a common practice of mobilising in favour of immediate demands and on the basis of this new common experience, conduct a debate in the medium and long term on strategy and on a project for society.

## A Political Space

For the moment the WAsG has about 7,000 members. That may seem few (the young German Communist Party, the KPD, had 50,000 after the First World War, the VKPD that came out of the fusion of the KPD and the majority of the USPD in 1920 had at least 300,000 and even the small SAP at the beginning of the 1930s had 30,000). But it is an association that is mainly concerned with laying the basis for the building of a new party. A large part of this work is being done in a purely organisational way, which of course expresses a congenital weakness of the (trade union) apparatuses. Furthermore the WAsG, which had a resounding echo in the media when it was set up, has almost disappeared from the media. Its local groups are only slowly and partially starting to get involved in campaigns and the WAsG is not yet a party, but only an "association", which makes recruitment more difficult. Finally, the wave of mobilisation against Hartz IV and the other anti-social government measures of the 2010 Agenda became much weaker after reaching its high point at the end of August; and the workers have suffered fresh defeats (Daimler, Volkswagen, Opel—). Under these conditions, the figure of 7,000 seems quite impressive.

The opinion polls conducted by institutes like Emnid (in July) or Infratest Dimap (in March, July and August) gave the WAsG between 4 and 11 per cent of the vote. Since the new party does not yet exist and the WAsG is little known to

the public at large, that is encouraging. Commentaries from the above-mentioned institutes are consequently citing a much higher potential vote, going as high as 32 or even 37 per cent. The “political barometer” of ZDF (the second publicly-owned channel of German TV) announced in July 2004 that the WASG could take 22 per cent of votes from the Greens, 15 per cent from the SPD and 41 per cent from the PDS. And probably a fairly high number of “ballot box boycotters” could be mobilised electorally by a new party to the left of the SPD. Of course, all that is still speculation. But the statements of voting intentions in reply to the questions by the polling institutes show that a new left party with just a bit of dynamism could count on a significant electoral potential.

## The Case of North Rhine Westphalia

The strongest regional section of the WASG is in North Rhine Westphalia, with about 1,300 members. There, especially in Cologne, Bonn and Dusseldorf (as well as in Berlin, by the way) the forces of the small anti-capitalist Left (including the members and sympathisers of the International Socialist Left (ISL) play quite an important role and have won leading positions at local level as well as two places on the regional leadership (made up of 16 members). [5] One of the questions hotly debated in the WASG concerned whether the “new party to be created” should make its debut at the regional elections that will take place on May 22, 2005 in North Rhine Westphalia or only at the federal elections in the winter of 2006. The majority of leading members argued against the first choice. Why was that? On the one hand, for fear of suffering a defeat, or not yet being organisationally ready to take up the challenge. On the other hand, Klaus Ernst for example expressed another fear, not very acceptable: “It could be that, with MPs in the parliament of the Land Of North Rhine Westphalia, we would get into an uncomfortable situation; we could be forced to support a “red-green” government of the SPD and the Greens in order to bar the road to the conservatives and liberals of the CDU and the FDP, and that would significantly lower our chances at the federal elections in 2006”. It was clear that the anti-capitalist forces had to protest against such a position. They argued for; a) the WASG to stand in the regional elections in North Rhine Westphalia; b) that at the same time the WASG should publicly announce that it was not prepared to support a neo-liberal government that was organising the social mauling of the dispossessed; and c) that the WASG should build through campaigns and not confine itself to taking part in elections and institutions. In an membership aggregate of the WASG in North Rhine Westphalia in Duisburg-Rheinhausen (with 500 people taking part of whom 403 had the right to vote), the anti-capitalist forces in the WASG were able to defeat the leadership on the first point, because a big majority of members are getting impatient: when all is said and done we have to stand, take the offensive! The most convincing argument was this: the recent regional elections in Brandenburg and in Saxony-Anhalt showed that the absence of the sort of alternative that the WASG could provide worked to the advantage of the forces of the far Right! Even Klaus Ernst, who was present at the meeting, could not manage to contain the feeling in favour of standing candidates from May 2005. On this point, the members with an anti-capitalist profile won a large majority and since then the leaders of North Rhine Westphalia swear that they are going to carry out the rank and file's wishes. [6]

## Towards a New Party

What stage is the process of launching the new party at? On November 20-21 2004 there was a federal conference of the WASG in Nuremberg, this time with elected delegates. A new leadership was elected - in the main it maintains the continuity of the previous one, but with some changes. It should be noted that a comrade of Linksruck - Christine Buchholz - was elected. The discussion, although largely dominated by the semi-bureaucratic preparation of the outgoing leadership, was on a good level. There too, there was a large majority in favour of taking part in the elections in North Rhine Westphalia in May 2005 and the leaders who argued against taking part, like Klaus Ernst, were contested. [7]

Now the WASG has launched a postal referendum of its members to decide if it should proclaim a new party or not.

There will very probably be a big majority in favour. If two thirds or more are in favour, the party will be formally created at an assembly of regional delegates on January 22, 2005. [8] Between now and then, a commission is responsible for preparing statutes and a founding programme. After that, regional federations of the party will be set up. In March 2005, there will be a big “programmatic” congress. At the end of April or the beginning of May, there will be a big “founding” congress of the party. It is very clear that from the point of view of timing, this plan is very tight, if we want to stand in the regional elections in North Rhine Westphalia on May 22, 2005! The party will have to be established at regional level: we will need to collect signatures: raise 400,000 euros; work out a regional electoral platform; organise to stand candidates everywhere in order to take full advantage of the allocation of seats via the “second vote”, (that is proportionally): organise a mobilisation of militants right across Germany to reinforce the regional campaign; get functioning local groups up and running; organise a campaign also in the towns where the WASG does not yet have members, etc. All that is tight. All that is being prepared, but we cannot yet be 100 per cent certain that we will be able to carry it off!

The electoral chances of a party created by the WASG seem all the better since the SPD, at the European elections, lost 13.7 million (!) of its electors, of whom 10.7 million abstained. That is enormous.

But how should we judge the political content of this alternative? Normally, if we are working to build a broader part of the Left, we think in terms of the “anti-capitalist Left”. But the WASG does not claim to be “anti-capitalist”. Whereas the PDS - formally and very “platonically” - is in favour of “socialism”, the WASG is not. Furthermore, it confines itself almost exclusively to the social front. It says nothing about Iraq, NATO, international politics, almost nothing about the global justice movement or other social movements.

In the draft documents for a programme of the new party, alongside affirmations and demands on which everyone can agree, we find ideas emanating from the “left Keynesians”, such as the idea that we have to improve “the purchasing power” of the masses in order to re-launch the economy. This idea links the working-class struggle to the interest that capital has in making profits by selling enough commodities intended for mass consumption. They forget that an increase in wages (and social benefits) cuts profits and, in more general terms, that big capital, today, fighting against the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, is not ready to make substantial material concessions. Quite the contrary: it wants at any price to impose social regression and increase the rate of exploitation of workers.

## And the Anti-capitalist Left?

In view of the moderation of the present political profile of the WASG, we might ask why the forces of the anti-capitalist Left are active in it. We might think of the comments that Engels made in his time, referring to Weitling's Utopian communism: if the child's shoes of this proto-party look so much like a dwarf's, it seems difficult to predict that it will have the adult body of an athlete.

In spite of all that, the WASG represents a chance to take an important step forward in the development of the class consciousness of the German working class on the political level. Marx, in 1850, drawing the lessons of the defeat of the democratic revolution in Germany in 1848, argued among other things, for the creation of a workers' party, in order to attain the political independence of the working class, so that it could free itself from being politically dominated by the forces of the liberal bourgeoisie and of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and learn to express its class interests in the political domain. Uwe Hixsch, coming from the left of the SPD, who played a leading role in the PDS and came into conflict with the majority of the PDS leadership on the question of participating in governments led by the SPD, said the same thing in 2004: “With the attempt to develop a common policy of wage-earners and the unemployed, the immigrants, the excluded, there is a chance that socialist demands and socialist positions become audible again and capable of winning majorities *Workers of all tendencies, unite!* For the Left, there could be a qualitative leap, if we succeed in uniting wage-earners and the marginalized layers into a political subject acting in



common”.

Historical analogies never “fit” 100 per cent, but since the SPD can no longer be considered as a political instrument in the service of working people and the poorest layers of the population, the WAsG seems to be the beginnings of a process expressing a step forward in political class consciousness among the vanguard of the German working class, organising, roughly speaking, the layer of militants and trade union officials who had - without waiting for the “orders” of the national leaderships - mobilised independently for the demonstration on November 1, 2003 in Berlin.

That is why the ISL took a position in favour of taking part in the WAsG process. It is true that there was and that there will again be attempts to marginalise or push out the forces of the anti-capitalist left of the new party that is developing, especially if its tactical behaviour facilitates it. For the moment there is no question of campaigns of expulsions. The main leader in North Rhine Westphalia, Huseyin Aydin, has just publicly declared, in an interview with the left daily Junge Welt: “We want to include many colours, and so we are in favour of also welcoming, for example the militants of the SAV and of Linksruck”.

The question of democracy in the new party nevertheless remains important, although certain not very experienced members are somewhat overdoing the theme of “rank and file democracy” and the “bureaucratic style” of the leadership. This leadership has at least to its credit to have launched the right initiative at the right time. But neither pluralism nor the rights of currents, nor the revocability and responsibility of the leaders or future MPs to the members of the new party, have been won in the WAsG. That is a problem: it remains an important issue, among other reasons for the discussion on the statutes of the new party, a discussion that has only just begun. We are trying to reply by explaining that there are reasons why the SPD got to be the way it is and why so many attempts at emancipatory political objectives have failed and continue to fail; that the mechanisms of adaptation are well-known. One of the reasons is precisely the development of uncontrollable leading layers, apparatuses and elected officials, quickly taken over by material and psychosocial temptations, and by parliamentary, or even more so, governmental institutions. That is why we have to try to build a party that is really “governed” by its members. And we have to refrain from marginalising or expelling currents: nobody can claim to have a convincing balance sheet. Together, we have to invent something new - and in the process, the anti-capitalist forces, and even more so the revolutionary Marxists, have on the one hand something to learn from the other currents, but on the other hand also something to contribute: their programmatic heritage, their intellectual culture, the way they look at the lessons of contemporary historical experiences, from the point of view of the defeated masses, their dedication to fight in the framework of the class struggle, their consistent internationalism.

It would be wrong to want to impose a revolutionary programme on this new party. It would even be wrong to want to impose a socialist programme on it. That would not correspond to the level of consciousness that it expresses politically, at least at this stage. What we have to try to patiently explain, is that a lucid analysis of today's neo-liberal capitalism and of the fundamental tendencies that are driving big capital to its ferocious offensive against the social conquests and against the most elementary interests of the workers and the poor, enables us to say that it will not be possible to go back to the Welfare State of the 1970s, or even to organise the defence of the remaining conquests without challenging the capitalist market economy. Without having the objective of an alternative to the capitalist system, it will not be in the long term possible to reply effectively to the only “true” argument of capital and the politicians who serve it: the argument of competition and of the “necessity” of combating the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

The ISL's policy of bringing together the forces of the small anti-capitalist left for discussion and common actions - it was on the ISL's initiative that there was established in May 2003, among other reasons in view of the European elections, the network or forum of the “Friends of the European Anti-capitalist Left in Germany” - has not been bypassed by the WAsG process. It is now a question not only of continuing to make this co-operation of the anti-capitalist forces in general work, but also to make them capable of being recognised as a current of ideas that is taken seriously in the WAsG or the new party which will very probably be launched from the beginning of 2005. This

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is not easy and it will not include all the organisations of this small anti-capitalist Left. For example a large majority of the RSB - the other organisation in Germany linked to the Fourth International - considers that the WAsG is not the "socialist workers' party" that needs to be created, that it is not even reformist and that therefore we should not take part in building it. The SAV, the section of the CWI, considers for its part that we have to intervene in the WAsG process, but its majority wants to do so by organising itself in a fairly ultimistic way around a "socialist action programme", and the somewhat doctrinaire way of intervening of many (not all) of its militants does not help to get revolutionaries accepted. So all that is not so easy, but we have to try to include everyone in a process of mutual apprenticeship.

11 December 2004.

We have taken this article from the Madrid journal Viento Sur n° 78, December 2004: <[www.vientosur.info](http://www.vientosur.info)>  
<http://www.vientosur.info>>.

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[1] The name is a reference to the "Monday demonstrations" that led to the fall of the SED regime in East Germany in the autumn of 1989.

[2] The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) came out of the crisis and transformation of the SED, the ruling party in the ex-German Democratic Republic, which in December 1989 took the name SED-PDS and then dropped the first part of its name a few months later.

[3] Socialist Alternative (SAV) is an organisation of the Trotskyist far left, German section of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI, an international regroupment whose main section is the Socialist Party in Britain).

[4] Linksruck is a far left organisation, German section of the International Socialist Tendency, whose main organisation is the Socialist Workers' Party in Britain.

[5] Several anti-capitalist militants got between 70 and 120 votes in the elections for the new leadership, while the main leader, Huseyin Aydin (member of the leadership of the WAsG, full-time official of IG-Metall in Dusseldorf) who was elected with the most votes, only got 220 out of 403 - the election of the regional leadership was marked by a strong polarisation between the two "wings".

[6] For information on the debates in the WAsG in other regions, see the article by Angela Klein in Inprecor 498/499.

[7] Thus, in the elections for the leadership, Klaus Ernst, (full-time official of IG-Metall, well-known for belonging to its left wing and one of the main SPD members among those who launched the "Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice" in Spring 2004), only came second.

[8] The results of this "referendum" which became known after this article was written, are quite clear: of the 5577 members of the association, 4377 took part in the vote (78.5 per cent). Of these 4205 (96.07 per cent of those voting) came out in favour of founding the party, which will therefore be founded on January 22, 2005 at a meeting of the Council of the Regions. More information is available on their web site: <http://www.wahlalternative-asg.de/>.