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Germany

Between rage and impotence

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As was the case in other EU countries, Germany's European parliamentary elections were marked by a growing discontent - primarily with the policies of the federal government. If most commentators see it as a protest vote, it is nonetheless increasingly difficult to define it politically because it takes the most varied forms.

Abstention dominated and given this fact, as well as the extremely low level of the campaign, it is not possible to deduce a precise political message from these elections. At best it can be seen as an expression, freed from any tactical preoccupation, of rage or resignation in the face of the neoliberal policies imposed in Germany over the past two years through Agenda 2010. The political climate has darkened considerably over this period.

The results of the European elections were confirmed by those of the regional elections in Thuringia and the municipal and cantonal elections in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Rhineland-Pfatz, Saarland and Baden-Wuerttemberger which also took place on June 13. In these elections the rate of participation was generally better than for the European elections but remained below that of the corresponding elections of 1999.

The polling institute Allensbach, which is of a conservative orientation, carried out a poll just before the elections of June 13. Asked whether the federal government had realized "the ideal of social justice" 73% of those polled answered in the negative (two years ago only 59% replied thus). 84% of the population pronounced themselves unhappy with governmental policy, against only 14% who were satisfied. While 81% expressed concern about the future, only 14% declared their confidence in an economic upturn. According to the poll, the great majority considered the state, the rich and the bosses as the main beneficiaries, while among the victims were the retired (71%), the poor (70%), those on low wages (69%) and the unemployed (58%).

Only 43% of voters participated in these European elections as against 45.2% in 1999, or nearly one million less. Spoiled votes nearly doubled (2.8%). The small lists of the "others" won 6.3% in 1999. In 2004 this score rose to more than 9% and in absolute figures it more than doubled. In 2004 these "others" - amounting to 18 parties (against 12 in 1999) - totaled 2,532,988 votes, or more than the CSU and nearly half the SPD. Among these "others" the DKP [1] won only 37,231 votes. In Rostock, capital of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region, the "List against social demolition" put forward by the SAV (German section of the Committee for a Workers International) won 2.5% and a seat on the municipal council. The PDS [2] share of the poll has gone up constantly (1994 - 4.1%, 1999 - 5.8%, 2004 - 6.1%). But in absolute figures, between 1999 and 2004, it only gained 11,948 votes.

The first lesson which we can draw is that it is not possible, on the basis of the PDS result, to really speak of a breakthrough for forces to the left of the SPD. What can be said is that the PDS benefited from a protest vote - to a modest degree, much more modest than the other "small parties" who were not on the far right, and much more modest than the Greens.

At the federal level, the various far right lists increased their vote from 2.1% to 3.6%; the Republikaner had the biggest vote with 1.9%, the NPD 0.9%. But in several eastern cities far right electoral alliances scored 10% and more. The vote for the NPD in the Saxony municipal elections was particularly worrying. It won 13.4% and 6 seats in the small tourist region Sächsische Schweiz near the Czech frontier, and in other municipalities between 9% and 25%.

Results of German elections

	parliamentary 1998 %	European 1999 %	parliamentary 2002 %	European 2003 %
participation	82.2	45.2	79.1	43.0
PDS	5.1	5.8	4.0	6.1
SPD	40.9	30.7	38.5	21.5
Greens	6.7	6.4	8.6	11.9
CDU	28.4	39.3	29.5	36.5
CSU	6.7	9.4	9.0	8.0
FDP	6.2	3.0	7.4	6.1

Source: Bundeswahlleiter

These figures indicate two trends. The SPD and the Christian Democrats have lost votes both in absolute terms and in percentage terms, while the “small parties” - PDS, FDP [3] and Grünen (Greens) - have gained.

The Grünen made a great leap forward. They presented themselves as the only genuinely European party, open, cosmopolitan, modern, distinguishing themselves from “backward” forces, whether right wing “Eurosceptics” who demand more national sovereignty, or the left Eurosceptics who demand a higher level of social rights on the European scale. In a country historically fatigued by the quest for a national identity, the Grünen offer the idea of Europe as a force capable of exerting weight in the world, both as a “civilizing” force in relation to US imperialism and a bulwark against the resurgence of German imperialism. They do not discuss the crying contradictions between this ideal and the social brutality that neoliberal European integration offers. Their clientele suffers less, and the party is capable of formulating an alternative bourgeois strategy to that of the right, of which a section at least is decidedly not in synch with the rhythms of globalization. It is this aspect which makes them interesting for all kinds of milieus, from the anti-fascist left (an anti-fascism reduced to the denunciation of anti-Semitism), to the liberal professions to the supporters of globalization. In political coherence they generally outdo the liberal FDP, who are divided between the interests of big capital and a petty bourgeois support base they try to keep happy with populist promises - although the FDP too made progress everywhere at these elections. In the public profile of the Grünen the political-cultural aspect prevails over their economic orientation (which is more neoliberal than that of the Blairites of the SPD!). Thus in Berlin, where the SPD and PDS govern, it was the Greens who reaped the protest vote; with 22.7% they became the second political force (the SPD only won 19.2%), simply because they are in opposition and less discredited than Christian Democracy.

On the day after June 13 the bourgeois press noted that the SPD had crossed “the brink of catastrophe”. It remains around 5% below predictions, scoring 21.5% against 30.7% in 1999. It lost 2.75 million votes (against 1.2 million votes lost by the CDU), its worst score ever in a national election. An average of 21.5% means that there were places where things were much worse. The lowest score was in Köstritz, a small town in Brandenburg, where the SPD did not even reach the threshold of 5%, scoring only 4.8%. Its fall is still more dramatic if one compares these results with those of the general elections of 2002. At that time the SPD won 18.5 million votes. In June it won 5,549,243 million. According to exit polls, 13.9 million of those who had voted for the SPD in 2002 did not do so this time whereas 980,000 who didn't vote SPD in 2002 did so this time; 10.7 million former SPD voters abstained this time, 880,000 voted CDU/CSU and 270,000 voted PDS. There was not then any remarkable shift of SPD voters towards the PDS (no more than the

shift to the right in any case).

The vote for the PDS was ambiguous. At the federal level it gained in votes and in percentage terms (11,948 votes or 0.3%). This is not enormous given the collapse of social democracy and if one considers that the PDS appears as the sole force to the left of the SPD. Comparing its European result with that at the federal elections of 2002, the ambiguity is manifest. In 2002 the PDS won 1.9 million votes. It lost 930,000 to abstention, but gained 790,000 new electors; 270,000 of them came from the SPD, 170,000 from the Greens, 130,000 from the CDU. Thus in June 2004 the stable electorate of the PDS was reduced to 780,000 votes! The share of protest voters in its total vote increased while the share of its political support diminished.

The PDS did not escape the logic of alternation which dominated these elections. In western Germany it gained in votes and in percentage, but it remains a party below 5% - the few exceptions confirm the rule. In Duisburg for example, where the PDS won 4.1% of the votes and three seats at the municipal elections of autumn 1999, in 2004 it won 2,000 votes more than in the European elections of 1999, but lost 2,000 votes in relation to the municipal elections of 1999.

In most of the eastern Lander the PDS is in opposition, although it is often the second political force. Where it is in governmental coalition with the SPD, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and in Berlin, the PDS lost in votes and in percentage. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the rate of participation in the European vote was among the highest, at 45.4%. The PDS lost 35,000 votes and fell from 24.3% to 21.7%; the SPD lost 41,000 votes and fell to 16%, and the CDU remains the biggest party. In Berlin, the PDS fell from 16.7% to 14.4% and lost 28,199 votes, while the SPD declined from 26.7% to 19.2% and lost 79,000 votes; the CDU lost 93,000 votes while the Grünen won 90,000 and the Liberals 15,000. In Brandenburg, where a CDU/SPD coalition rules, participation was at its lowest, 26.9%. Here the PDS became the biggest party, relegating the CDU to second place. It won a total of 172,235 votes (30.9%) as against 156,313 (25.8%) in 1999. The Grünen and liberals doubled their votes and their percentage score. In Saxony the PDS won 2.5 %, while losing 23,930 votes.

All this means that the PDS was not seen as a programmatic alternative to social-liberalism. A little to the left, but not consistently so. The anti-capitalist left did not vote for it, above all because of its still ambiguous position on the draft European constitution. At its last electoral congress in January the PDS decided to oppose this constitution, because of the militarization it involved. But this “no” was sufficiently relative to allow Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann, at the head of the PDS European list, to call on her party not to say “no” during the process of ratification of the constitutional treaty because, in her view, that would marginalize it “in the same way that the KPD was marginalized after the war when it came out against the Basic Law in 1948”.

In Thuringia the PDS scored a major success. In opposition to a CDU government with an absolute majority, it became the second largest party. It improved its position still further, for the first time winning five constituencies on a first past the post ballot. [4] The proportional result gave the PDS an increase of 15,811 votes - it went from 21.3% to 26.1%. The SPD, already in third position, fell further from 18.5% to 14.5% (losing nearly 100,000 votes). Nonetheless, the most significant result was the loss of the Christian Democrats' absolute majority - their share of the vote fell from 51% to 43% and they lost 158,386 votes. If the success of the PDS was spectacular here, it should be relativized. The Greens, without any tradition or milieu in eastern Germany, benefited most from the decline of the CDU and SPD. With 45,649 votes they more than doubled their score of 1999 (24,032 votes extra) and only just missed their first entry into the regional parliament (Landtag), with 4.8% of the vote (a minimum of 5% is required). The FDP tripled their vote and entered the parliament with 51,000 votes. The “other” parties stabilized around 70,000 votes. Spoiled ballots nearly doubled (43,000 votes).

The municipal elections in Saxony present a still more sombre picture. Participation was 46.1%: the SPD fell by more than 320,000 votes to 11.4%; the CDU lost 545,235 votes and fell from 39.9% to 34.8%; the FDP gained 14,000 votes

which allowed them to reach 5.2%, the Grünen gained 15,000 votes and scored 3.1%; the PDS went from 16.9% to 18.55 but lost 60,172 votes.

In Baden-Wuerttemberger the PDS, already present in four municipal councils (Stuttgart, Constance, Karlsruhe, Tübingen), can now add others: Mannheim, Heidelberg, Friburg with scores between 1.8% (Stuttgart) and 8.6% (Tübingen).

The gap between SPD and PDS widened in eastern Germany and the PDS looks ready to take the place of the SPD there; here the SPD is losing its support among the workers and the PDS overtook it in most social categories. Thus in the European elections the SPD only won 24% (-12%) among workers, whereas the PDS went from 21 to 26%. Among employees and civil servants the SPD lost 3% (and scored 24%), the PDS went from 24% to 28%. Among the unemployed the SPD scored 21% (-11%), while the PDS rose from 28% to 37%. Among the small and medium employers the SPD lost 4% - it is the only category in which the PDS also lost 3% - but the SPD scored 13% and the PDS 33%.

All this indicates that the PDS is not in a position to fill the vacuum opening to the left of the SPD and the governmental left, in particular in the west. It is not then surprising that the process of the Electoral Alternative ("Wahlalternative") underway in western Germany, which should culminate in an electoral challenge at the general elections in 2006 [5] has not been halted by the PDS results - even if the latter scored some remarkable results in some places in the West. The PDS leadership itself seems to have abandoned the project of building the party beyond the Elbe and envisages rather an electoral alliance with the Wahlalternative for 2006. This project is not yet approved by the Wahlalternative, because the latter is in full preparation for its founding congress in autumn and is in the midst of a depoliticizing organizational process.

As a general line we should note the following:

- the parallel existence of the Wahlalternative and the PDS reflects the division of the country and above all that of the workers' movement. It is a heritage of the 1920s which has still not been overcome.
- the two differ considerably in their social roots and their mode of birth. The PDS is a former state-party and those who call themselves "socialists" inside it were often part of the intellectual elite of a bureaucratized workers' state; they employ a socialist vocabulary but their conception remains that of a state "socialism". The Wahlalternative is the result of a real radicalization of the fringe of the workers' movement, but a radicalization which is not primarily the fruit of the evolution to the left of their own positions but rather of the SPD's turn to the right. The PDS has a smooth running apparatus while the Wahlalternative has none.
- so far as the vital questions posed to a credible left alternative today - programme, conception of party, political culture, relationship to the bourgeois state and its institutions, Keynesian orientation - the two formations do not greatly differ at the end of the day, except that the Wahlalternative is more open to the anti-capitalist left.

So it would be wrong to consider the Wahlalternative immediately as an alternative to the PDS. There are reformist currents (which are in the majority) and currents opposed to a governmental line in the two organizations. The difference is that the process of the Wahlalternative, which is starting, is still much more open, while the development of the PDS has already led to an ossification, even if it cannot be considered as totally closed before the new challenge posed by the collapse of the SPD, in particular in eastern Germany.

[1] The DKP, German Communist Party, was marginal in West Germany and was broadly aligned behind Soviet policies. It remained in existence after German unification and did not join the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) which replaced the SED (United Socialist Party, the ruling party in East Germany). In recent years there has been a reorientation of the DKP towards the movement for global justice and the anti-capitalist left. The PDS opposed its entry into the new European Left Party set up by parties from the Communist tradition (see elsewhere in this issue). The circle of friends of the European Anti-capitalist Left (EACL) in Germany had on two occasions discussed a common candidacy with the DKP, but this had met with little enthusiasm among the various Trotskyist tendencies. In truth, only the isl and DKP were interested in this idea. The DKP then decided to present open lists on its own and gained 37,231 votes (0.1%). Its candidacy did not attract the layers who criticize the SPD or PDS from the left.

[2] The Party of Democratic Socialism emerged from the East German state-party. Although it has tried to position itself to the left of the SPD, it has not become a significant force in the west and, in the most recent federal elections in 2002, did not reach the threshold of 5%, losing its parliamentary group except for two directly elected deputies in Berlin.

[3] The FDP - the liberal party - has long been a transitional party located between the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and social democracy (SPD). Since the 1970s it has grown constantly weaker, allowing the Greens in particular to make a breakthrough. It currently benefits from the crisis of the two dominant parties.

[4] In Germany, the federal and regional elections (in the Lander) involve a system where half the deputies are elected on a single list, by proportional representation, and the other half on constituency lists on a first past the post basis.

[5] See "[New challenges, new chances](#)" IV 359, May/June 2004.