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Germany

Die Linke and our activity within it

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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The emergence of the Die Linke party constituted a substantial change in the political landscape in Germany. [1] To give an order of magnitude, Die Linke has about 80,000 members (compared to 400,000 for the SPD and 60,000 for the Greens). With 8.6 per cent of the vote it currently has 76 members of the Bundestag out of 614. It is a member of the European Left Party and sits in the European Parliament in the Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left with 7 MEPs. (7.4 per cent of the vote in the 2014 European elections).

Die Linke is currently participating in three regional governments: in the LÃ¤nder of Brandenburg since November 2014, Thuringia since December 2014, and following the elections of last September and the so-called red-red-green coalition agreement (SPD-Greens-Die Linke) concluded in November, in the Land of Berlin, now for the second time. Despite all this, no one in Germany considers it very likely that this party can be integrated into the national government; journalists and social democrats broadly concur in describing it as "irresponsible and not capable of governing", with within it forces that are considered utopian, leftist and extremist, and that are the object of close supervision by the state security services. [IVP]

Theses of the isl

I. Since the disastrous results of the March 2016 regional elections in Baden-WÃ¼rttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, a debate is raging in Die Linke on the causes and the consequences. Thus, in their text entitled "Revolution for Social Justice and Democracy!" [2] Co-Chairs Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger [3] seek to explain the failure of their party and the breakthrough of the far right Alliance for Germany (AfD). The refusal to seek government participation at any price is clearly expressed, as is the refutation of the existence of a "left camp" (with the SPD and the Greens) and the need to improve the capacity of the party to engage in mobilizations. This orientation was impressively confirmed in May at the Congress of Magdeburg, and again at the Regional Congress of North Rhine-Westphalia in June. The amendments that were aimed at strengthening the anti-capitalist position, and which we supported, were adopted with strong majorities. It remains to be seen how we can put these statements into practice. Among those who vote for Die Linke, many of are waiting for at least some of its proposals and demands to be implemented. The appropriate answer cannot be that Die Linke contorts itself in government coalitions with the SPD and the Greens until it is no longer identifiable. On the other hand, one can imagine participation in majorities with variable geometry which make it possible not to bear responsibility for pro-capitalist measures.

II. It must be emphasized, however, that the policy of the party lacks as much constancy as it presents different facets; it does not correspond to our conception of a "plural party", to the "search for consensus" or a party which "asks questions while advancing". In the East, in the five LÃ¤nder and in Berlin, the line of participation in government is hegemonic. The forces that want to reconfigure the party so that it can "take on governmental responsibilities" at the federal level are also powerful; their privileged relations with the media put them in a position to conduct a campaign of permanent defamation of the left, which it presents as irresponsible and, depending on the circumstances, as archaic or utopian.

In Thuringia, the "red-red-green" coalition (Die Linke-SPD-Greens), headed by the Prime Minister-who is a member of Die Linke, manages affairs as if nothing had happened; in Brandenburg, with the "red-red" coalition, Die Linke acts as a brave partner of the SPD government majority and supports, among other things, the exploitation of lignite against criticism and mobilization, in contradiction with the positions of the party, which have been repeatedly

reaffirmed, as in the "Red Project for a social and ecological transformation"... The contradiction between the internal debates on the socialist transformation of society and the practice of managing state power is all the more clear in that there is nowhere a situation which could be opposed to it, nor are there radical changes in the balance of forces in favour of those below. Nevertheless, the fundamental trend towards adaptation has, until now, at national level, at each stage, been met with a backlash that has expanded the possibilities of developing anti-capitalist positions. This is what is happening for the next period, until the federal elections in the autumn of 2017, but it nevertheless confronts the left of Die Linke with new challenges.

III. Die Linke has very often taken part in the mobilizations against the Nazis and the racist demonstrations. At present, along with pacifist questions, it is really one of the sectors of intervention that gives its identity to the party. Similarly, participation in initiatives that last year contributed to the success of hosting migrants. In the cities where there were extreme right-wing demonstrations every week, party organizations were part of the counter-mobilizations. Party leaders like Katja Kipping, Bernard Riexinger and Janine Wissler, by their articles and positions, clearly developed the party's programme: individual asylum without limitations, opening of borders, against Fortress Europe, Frontex and sending the navy against the refugees. The parliamentary group voted against all measures that challenged the right of asylum and residence.

It is all the more regrettable that Sarah Wagenknecht [4] and Oskar Lafontaine [5] have taken a public position against what the party defends. Clearly, they believe that speeches about limited capacity, abuse of the right to asylum and sexual assault cannot be allowed to go by without replying to them on the same terrain. In his stronghold of Saar, Lafontaine openly defends the limitation of immigration, on the same line as the Bavarian CSU [6]. The internal confrontations thus no longer concern only different positions, they have become oppositions between people. Thus, the appeal of Jan van Aken [7] for the resignation of Sarah Wagenknecht from her position as president of the parliamentary group triggered a campaign supporting him, with nearly 10,000 signatures. However, Sarah Wagenknecht and her public statements are in a minority in the party. The leadership did what had to be done so that things were clear, with evident success, since there are no longer any attempts at present to change the line.

The partisans of Sara Wagenknecht often use the argument that the reformist wing of the party is taking advantage of the opportunity to weaken the positions of the left. But fortunately the AKL [8] clearly distinguished itself from the public positions of Wagenknecht. This brought the AKL, justifiably, a strong current of sympathy.

IV. Structural developments of great concern are at work in Die Linke, those that have been experienced by all organizations that are reformist and/or turned primarily towards government participation. Barely forcing the trait, one can make the observation that the adherents have virtually no say, the governing bodies not much and the parliamentary groups all. A well-known model. Bureaucratization, the accumulation of mandates, circumvention of the rules of separation of functions and mandates, the number of people who cling to their positions, are only increasing. This is accompanied by a polarization around the activity of elected representatives or elections which is neither regulated nor controlled. It is both amazing and problematic that Die Linke has, so to speak, no awareness of what is happening there. Evolutions which, historically, in all the parties of the socialist left evolving towards the right, have always preceded programmatic backsliding.

V. The Antikapitalistische Linke (Anticapitalist Left, AKL) is currently the only current in the party which has taken this trend seriously. There have been "basic democratic" currents that focused solely on how the party operated. They disappeared because they were or became apolitical. On the positive side, the AKL manages to make a convincing link between the criticism of the diminution of democracy in the party and the accentuation of its parliamentarist character. This has won it growing interest and has even become the third pillar of its identity, with the clearly formulated objective of overcoming capitalism and giving priority to movements and mobilizations on the ground.

The AKL is today recognized as a current delimited by its programmatic positions and nevertheless loyally engaged

in the activity of the party. It has relatively well passed the risky test of being recognized as a statutory current [9], which in effect has meant organizing itself in a new way, adopting a new reference document and making a new registration of all its members. A project that the AKL had at the time made its own against the advice of the comrades of the isl: 850 people have declared that they have joined the AKL, and the new reference document continues to gather new supporters.

There is a lot of bitterness and pettiness among left-wing groups within Die Linke, demonstrations of sectarianism and unpleasant manoeuvres (in which unfortunately our comrades have not always acted collectively and intelligently). But it is no longer possible to crush or ignore the AKL, and this contributes to a large degree to the current crisis of the competing current "Sozialistische Linke" [10].

The AKL has always defended its positions openly, and it has formally reaffirmed this position after its reorganization and the strengthening of its structuring. It is organized on programmatic bases and not in order to obtain posts. Conversely, in many situations, in internal elections, for example, relying on the AKL is not exactly conducive to the advancement of a career.

In the AKL, we systematically seek to create the conditions for unity, the establishment of common positions; on this basis we turn to the whole party in the spirit of the strategy of transitional demands.

In the SL - and this is especially true for its sub-current "marx21" [11] one has often the impression of an entirely different choice, where it is first and foremost a question of putting the right people in the right positions, both in the party and to win electoral positions. This has resulted in many positions of full-timers and paid electoral representatives, but not in more programmatic clarity in the party or a genuinely socialist policy.

The positioning of the AKL has caused the SAV [12] to enter it. Unfortunately, it happens all too often that it acts as if its policy was to defend his own short-term interests as a "party in the party". Here, it may have negative effects, but at the same time it is not so rare that comrades of SAV can be led to understand the interest of more reasonable behaviour.

The lasting crystallization of the organized currents in the party is problematic. Even without a clearly-defined political identity, currents would continue to exist, if only because their existence, recognized by statute, entitles them to delegates. That also contributes to making the rivalry between the currents to the left of the "ministerialist" camp more difficult to overcome.

V1. The international sozialistische linke (international socialist left, isl) was in contact with the "initiative for work and social justice" (ASG) in 2004, and then participated in the "electoral alternative" (WASG), then in the process of merging the WASG with the PDS to form Die Linke. The isl has been working for many years in Die Linke, without the activity of its militants being necessarily coordinated. Particularly in North Rhine-Westphalia, isl members have taken up responsibilities in local and regional leaderships and are active in the AKL. In general, the isl strives to strengthen the left wing of the party, to establish links with the radical social movements outside the institutions and the anti-capitalist forces outside the party, to work towards the coming together of the forces of the Marxist left in Germany, to reinforce the awareness of the urgency at the European level of joint responses of social movements and political forces which are not content to oppose the austerity policy of all the dominant elites in Europe with an answer that is only verbal and who want to counterpose to that a movement that rises from below.

The isl fights for Die Linke to organize on the ground outside electoral periods and for the party to engage in regular and collective work in enterprises, unions and neighbourhoods.

VII. There are many points on which the practical work of the isl in Die Linke needs to be improved (as in other areas). The priority should be to go beyond the individualism that is too often present with us, to systematically define our objectives collectively and to strive to achieve them, and, at least as far as the most important issues are concerned, to arrive at common positions. Moreover, we want more political exchanges with those sectors of the organization that have other priorities for intervention (union work, social movements, etc.).

The fact that in the AKL we have recently found ourselves in two different currents of opinion indicates our specificity (not an organization that speaks with one voice and is held together with an iron hand by its leadership, unlike the image that we get from the usual caricatures of "Leninism"), but also our problems ("bunch of jokers"). Our members who are active in the party should have regular meetings. The genuinely important differences should ultimately be discussed in the leadership and with it, or at national conferences of the whole organization, which should make it possible to overcome them.

In the party and in the AKL, our members do not defend positions that are pre-determined and stamped "isl", they say what they think and take part in the discussions, trying to convince but also being ready to be convinced. This is important to us. Any one of us who, at the end of such discussions, arrives at conclusions that do not correspond to what is the consensus in the isl, puts this difference into debate among us. The outcome of the discussion is open.

In the new organization that will result from the merger of the isl with the Revolutionärer Sozialistischer Bund (RSB), we will propose:

1. To form a national "Die Linke" commission;
2. To prepare a document for the electoral campaign for the regional election in North Rhine-Westphalia in May 2017;
3. To continue to discuss more precisely our work, particularly in view of the elections for the Bundestag in September 2017.

Our refusal of sectarianism is an important part of our identity. Nevertheless, we will endeavour to win comrades of the party and the AKL to the isl insofar as the fundamental agreements and working together make it possible to envisage it.

* The general line of this document was adopted on 8 October 2016 by the national ("federal") conference of isl members, after intense discussion, by a very large majority, with one abstention. The isl is one of the two organizations of the Fourth International in Germany. A process of rapprochement, closer collaboration and unification with the other organization, the RSB, was completed in early December by a fusion congress.

[1] For a detailed analysis, see the following articles by Manuel Kellner: "A victory of the far right - the elections in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania" (internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4704, 18/09/2016); "Die Linke takes another step towards adaptation" (internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3317, 12/03/2014); "The Grand Coalition and left perspectives" (internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3216, 21/12/2013); "Merkel triumphs –what now?" (internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3163, 2/11/2013).

[2] The subtitle of this text, published in April 2016, is: "Proposals for an offensive strategy of Die Linke". Cf. <http://www.katja-kipping.de/de/article/1068.revolution-f%c3%bcr-soziale-gerechtigkeit-und-demokratie.html>.

[3] For the national governing bodies (Parteivorstand) there is the statutory rule of the "Doppelspitze" ("double head"): a woman and a man (or two women!); in the Landesverbände in the West it is everywhere the case, whereas in the East rather rarely. As regards the parliamentary groups, the co-presidency is not compulsory: thus from 2005 to 2009 Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine chaired the group together in the Bundestag, from

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October 2009 Gysi alone, since October 2015 Sarah Wagenknecht (originally from the East, on the left of the party) with Dietmar Bartsch (from the west, but on the right of the party) As regards the two leaders of the party, the positioning is also taken into consideration: a man and a woman, one representative from the East, one from the West, one representative of the moderate wing, one from the most radical wing, are unwritten rules but respected by all. Since 2012 Katja Kipping and Bernard Riexinger are the party's presidents, at the head of a 44-member leading body (Partei Vorstand). Katja Kipping (born in 1978) is a native of Dresden, Saxony and was a member of the PDS (successor to the SED state party) in the regional parliament from 1999 to 2005. She is a member of the Bundestag, a leading figure in the current "Emanzipatorische Linke". She is at the same time "pragmatic", for an unconditional income, for the uncompromising defense of the rights of asylum seekers, pro-Zionist against anti-Semitism, for the vote of party members on the choice of the two heads of the list for the " Bundestag elections... Bernard Riexinger (born 1955) has been a trade union official since 1991, and from 2001 to 2012 he was secretary general of ver.di (the big trade union federation of services) in the Stuttgart region. He was then a leader of the trade union left. He has never been member of a parliament and is not a member of any platform in the party.

[4] Sarah Wagenknecht, born in 1969, was the main leader of the PDS's "Kommunistische Plattform" (roughly speaking, dogmatic-nostalgic). She has evolved towards more "realistic" positions, though well differentiated from those of the "ministerialist" right of the party. Vice-president of Die Linke until 2015, she currently co-chairs its parliamentary group. Since 2014, she has been married to Oskar Lafontaine.

[5] Oskar Lafontaine, born in 1943, was a leading figure in Social Democracy and former co-chairman of the SPD. He was formerly president of the Land of Saarland, president of the SPD From 1995 to 1999 and briefly Minister of Finance under Gerhard Schröder. He left the SPD in 2005, a few months before the early federal elections, and became leader of the "Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice" (WASG), which regrouped left oppositionists, trade unionists, various people disappointed by social-democracy and some sectors of the far left. He was one of those who imposed a forced march to the merger in 2007 with the PDS of Gregor Gysi to form Die Linke. Having withdrawn from the Bundestag for health reasons, he remains president of the Die Linke group in the Saarland.

[6] Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), is the most right-wing party of the CDU-CSU-SPD coalition that supports Merkel

[7] Jan van Aken is a member of Parliament for Hamburg, a former leader of Greenpeace, active in the anti-nuclear and pacifist movement.

[8] Antikapitalistische Linke (AKL), one of the currents on the left of the party, was founded in 2006: members of the isl are active within it. It has six representatives in the national leadership, one of whom is a member of the isl and another belongs to the SAV (see note 12 below). This platform is experiencing tensions and there are at present two sub-currents.

[9] There are many currents, sub-currents and trends of opinion within Die Linke, with quite different forces and orientations from one Bundesland to the other. In addition, there can be more informal networks or frequent encounters (like the "Middle Earth" club", whose name is inspired by Tolkien). The currents recognized by the party and therefore entitled to representatives on federal and state leaderships and to a budget are: Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus (established and influential especially in the Länder of the former GDR and in Berlin: often called "the right within the left"), Netzwerk Reformlinke, Emanzipatorische Linke, Sozialistische Linke, Antikapitalistische Linke, Kommunistische Plattform, Äkologische Plattform, Geraer Dialog - Sozialistischer Dialog. Most have their own website. The left wing is mainly AKL and SL, but also many activists and non-aligned networks. The left wing is mainly AKL and SL, but also many activists and non-aligned networks.

[10] Sozialistische Linke (SL) had a number of trade union officials from the west among its founders in 2006. Its positions are neo-Keynesian and it is called "gewerkschaftlich orientiert" (oriented in priority towards trade unions). It has at least ten deputies in the Bundestag, many regional parliamentarians and two MEPs. It seems today to have around 800 members: it has lost influence and become quite heterogeneous. The supporters of marx21 (see note 11) are mostly involved, almost everywhere except in North Rhine-Westphalia (where they support the AKL or are outside organized currents).

[11] The "marx21" network has been in existence since 2007. Successor to the Linksruck organization which belonged to the International Socialist Tendency (IST, linked to the British Socialist Workers' Party) it operates autonomously from the SWP/IST. It is said to have at least 400 members, including two members of the national leadership of Die Linke (including one of the four vice-presidents of the party) and several members of the Bundestag and the Hessen Landtag, plus a number of collaborators . "Marx21" has influence within "dielinke.SDS", the student organization close to the party.

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[12] Sozialistische Alternative (SAV) is the section of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) whose main section is the Socialist Party in Britain. Its best-known representative is Lucy Redler, a member of the leadership of the party as a representative of the AKL (along with Thies Gleiss of the isl).