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Germany

# The time of Alternatives

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**This resolution was adopted by the Congress of the International Socialist Left (isl, one of the two public factions of the German section of the Fourth International) in December 2005. The point of view of the other public faction, the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSB) was published in International Viewpoint 370 ("[Build the extra-parliamentary opposition or join the Left Party?](#)" by B.B. Herbst).**

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/DL\\_youth-2.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/DL_youth-2.jpg)]

1. After the federal legislative elections (which were held on September 18, 2005) the political and social situation is in several respects paradoxical. Against the background of a purely defensive attitude of the big majority of the population against neo-liberal policies, the ultra-liberal version [1] of these policies could not be imposed to succeed social liberalism. [2] But neo-liberalism remains largely dominant. And although social liberalism failed, there is no other answer to the failure of the "Red-Green Coalition". From this comes the widespread feeling that the situation is "politically blocked".

When we look closer, the policies that are really being pursued by the Grand Coalition [3] represent a further slide to the right.

However, this government is weak. It is operating in an international, European, and national context which is seeing central elements of the new neo-liberal order (the war in Iraq, the WTO negotiations, the Bolkestein directive, the European Constitutional Treaty) meet more and more resistance, indeed even run the risk of not being able to be imposed. The government of Angela Merkel and Franz Muntefering [4] must find within its own ranks the balance between several variations of liberalism. It thus runs the risk - in an economic conjuncture that is still lacking in dynamism - of seeing both the employers' organisations (with their lobby in the Christian Democratic and Christian Social Unions) and part of the trade unions lining up against it.

But this government has the big advantage of having a parliamentary majority of two-thirds of the seats in the Bundestag. That makes it easier to modify the constitution if necessary, which would in that case enable it to get rid of a conception of federalism aiming at the unification of living conditions [5] and their upward alignment - to the detriment of an increase in pure economic competitiveness. The changes that are being programmed in this field are accompanied in the field of "internal security" by a strengthening of centralization and the reinforcement of authoritarian structures. (We see here the process that is already under way on the level of the European Union).

2. The government of the Grand Coalition presents an open flank to social contestation. But whereas the employers are brilliant in the way that they form an opposition, aiming to force the government to launch attacks that are much harder than what is provided for in the governmental contract of the coalition, the trade unions either continue to seek an alliance with the government ("so as to avoid the worst" as Michael Sommer, leader of the DGB trade union confederation claims) or practise a strategy of zigzags (as its the case with Ver.di). [6] In no case and for no union is mobilization against the government on the agenda, in a situation where only unions that were militant and conscious of their strength could prevent the government taking on board more and more of the employers' demands. The constellation of political and social forces is still such that a strong mobilization could destabilize this government and lead to its premature end. The probability that it will not last until the end of the legislature [7] is high; the question, however, is to know under what conditions it will fall and who will take the initiative of bringing it down - in other words who will prove to be the leading political or social force.

3. This government also intends to make the unemployed and low-paid workers carry the main burden of a

regressive redistribution of wealth. Although it does not yet dare to openly envisage new reforms - regressive measures that would be directly detrimental to the social base of each of the two big political forces which comprise it - it is advancing little by little, concerning for example the dismantling of protection against sackings, [8] or taking long detours over pensions and health. The implementation of the Hartz IV program [9] and of the increase in VAT [10] are issues around which it will perhaps be more difficult to mobilize than against Agenda 2010, [11] but they are contributing to a rise in discontent and a predisposition to contestation.

The big majority of electors voted in the federal legislative elections against the radical version of liberal policies and at the same time against the experiences that they had had with the "social democratic and green" variant. Notwithstanding that, 90 per cent of electors voted for political parties which are pursuing neo-liberal policies. Although the monopoly of neo-liberal ideas is now destabilized, including in Germany, the majority of people nevertheless remain attached to it because they don't see any alternative. The principal tasks of a left opposition - both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary - consist under these conditions of developing such an alternative on as broad a base as possible, of expressing it in a few slogans that are easily understandable and in developing an effective mass propaganda in favour of these slogans. The opposition, extra-parliamentary as well as parliamentary, must concentrate on this question - with means that are different in each case.

4. The mobilization against Agenda 2010 once again put the social question at the centre of action and discussion. Its most active and radical part was made up of the unemployed and of the population of East Germany - for a short time they also succeeded in including the unions in it. However the union leaderships quickly sacrificed this alliance with that part of the working class which was without jobs to their loyalty to the Schroder government. That did not fail to leave traces: that is how part of the lower and middle cadres of the trade union organizations turned towards a new political force to the left of the SPD, causing serious cracks in the social democratic hegemony that had for a long time dominated the German unions. But the process of radicalization at work in the unions was derailed onto the road of realpolitik. The unions thus avoided a debate about perspectives. The debate on the necessary renewal of the trade union movement did not take place and the trade union left was even weakened in the process.

The process of formation of the WASG [12] has not so far led to the unemployed being able to count on stronger allies in the union organizations. If we add to that the demobilizing strategy of the union leaderships towards the government and the difficulty of finding a new point of convergence for social mobilizations, this situation carries a big danger that anti-trade union attitudes will be strengthened among marginalized layers (in West as well as East Germany) - something which could already be seen during the last phase of the "Monday demonstrations". [13]

A strong trade union left remains the central lever of an extra-parliamentary opposition aiming to build a broad alliance of social movements. It alone is in a position to build a bridge between the union apparatuses and the extra-parliamentary movements.

5. Attacks coming from an unstable government will lead to an increase in social contestation. This is already happening, in the form of a rise of defensive struggles at the level of the workplace or on a local or regional level. Some of them have been crowned with success (as is demonstrated by the example of the struggle against sackings at Alstom or the struggle of Ver.di against the privatization of hospitals in the region of Baden-Wuerttemberg). They proved that even in unfavourable conditions we can have successes. Other battles are being conducted in a lukewarm way, remain isolated (such as the struggle of the unemployed) or else simply require an organizational and political/trade union lever that is broader and more powerful (like the struggle against sackings in the automobile industry). Campaigns like the one that Ver.di has conducted against the Lidl supermarkets [14] show that the unions are capable of learning from more advanced experiences (such as, for example, the campaigns carried out in the United States). But overall, many struggles suffer from the fact that they are conducted from an angle that is limited to the workplace and that the political perspective and/or the organizational means that would make it possible to discuss links between these problems and to act in a more general framework are missing.

6. The policy of accelerated social dismantling can only be stopped by an extra-parliamentary mobilization. The trade unions are very hesitant on this level. The formation of a new party to the left of the SPD [15] has up to now left its actors principally occupied by their own process. Furthermore, this party remains essentially centred on parliamentary action. Because of this there will not, in the near future, be other forms of action capable of preparing the necessary extra-parliamentary mobilization than those coming out of the process that was started by the Congress of Perspectives (May 2004) and the German Social Forum (July 2005), and is now continuing with the Conference on Action and Strategy. It is a question of trying to overcome the scattered character of actions of resistance, of social fightback (and in so doing to overcome their respective weaknesses); of putting the accent on common points and interests; of politicizing the struggles through making links between problems and issues; of building a sustainable common framework for action and discussion; and finally of laying the practical and programmatic foundations of a social and political alternative. This attempt can and must be independent of the union leaderships and the political parties. The possibility of its succeeding will depend in the long term on knowing to what extent the process of radicalization which is reflected in it affects the unions and the new left party.

7. The foundation of the WASG is an expression of the social and political radicalization and of the (partial) break with the SPD that took place under the Schroder government. Its fusion with the PDS, re-christened Linkspartei (Left Party) opens up the possibility of rebuilding, for the first time in Germany, a party to the left of the SPD which is present in the whole country and is represented in parliament. If the unification of the two parties succeeds, an important step would be taken on the road of the unification of the German workers' movement between East and West (which was in fact a political split). This split had paralyzed it for long periods in the course of the 20th century and prevented alternatives to capitalism which went beyond the bureaucratic Stalinist dead end being envisaged.

The process of building a new political party to the left of the SPD is extremely contradictory. Its results are not yet known. It is part of the tasks of a socialist left to lead it to a positive result. To do this it must however be conscious of its own contradictions and limits and it must define what it itself is looking for.

– The WASG is first of all cut across by a social contradiction. Born out of the wave of protests against Agenda 2010, of which the protests against the Hartz laws [16] represented the culmination, many of its members are themselves affected by this legislation. But its initiators and its leading personalities are in the majority trade union full-timers or members of workplace councils. [17] From this different social situation there result different expectations and different political cultures. For the unemployed whose allowances are running out - as in general for the increasing number of those who are excluded from this society - the struggle to obtain meaningful social protection, by any means, is the central question. Their situation pushes them to actions that will have an immediate effect, because they can't wait. The trade union militants who founded this party sought by doing so above all to see a new political force represented in parliament, a force that will be able to win on the political level what the trade unions no longer succeed in winning by collective bargaining and by strikes [18] (or no longer believe that they can obtain them by these means): a legal minimum wage, [19] the defence of pensions, the refusal of privatization in the health sector, a new redistribution of wealth, etc. They are seeking in the new left party an interlocutor in parliament, which they previously had with the SPD and which they have lost. [20] They are not looking for a political force which can organize the social movement and represent their interests, because they have the union for that. Trade union militants, even left ones, can come to terms with the classically social democratic division of labour between the union and parliamentary representation, whereas the unemployed and those who are excluded no longer can.

In this conflict we are fighting for a kind of party that has its essential field of action not in parliament, but in the organization of social contestation - in a new cooperation with the social movements, which as such are independent of political parties. For us the party is not a goal in itself. It is useful only insofar as it uses the means that it obtains through parliament to support extra-parliamentary forces. We are dealing, in the process of forming a new left party, with the issue of the limits of parliamentary work as to its effects, and at the same time with the need to remove the barriers separating parliaments and political parties from society, by reorganizing the relations between the left party and extra-parliamentary movements.

– The WASG was established through a process of breaking with the SPD, but also as a reaction to the fact that the PDS, because of its origins, its bureaucratic sclerosis and also its participation in governments, [21] was not able to absorb this process of breaking with the SPD. The imbalances are important: faced with the PDS, which rests on a stable social milieu and which has a mass base, in East Germany we have branches of the WASG which have scarcely a few hundred members and which have no political weight. In the West of the country, most of the time the WASG has more members. However the PDS can draw strength from the fact that it has a relatively experienced apparatus and is represented in several municipal councils. In Berlin the weight of the apparatus of the Linkspartei.PDS, which reinforces the desire to continue to participate in government, [22] is faced with a WASG that is much weaker numerically and of which the majority refuse this participation in government and the line of adaptation to the majority neo-liberal forces.

These differences weigh all the more heavily because the two parties are not very different as regards their basic orientation: in both of them the Keynesian line of seeking to reform capitalism, whose political ideal is essentially represented by the old-style Welfare State, is dominant. This orientation has become incapable of resolving the problems that face us.

– The character of the new party that is to be formed depends to a large degree on the way that the process of unification will be carried through. If the WASG is to be more than the finally successful extension of the PDS to the West, [23] it must define the points on which it is different from the PDS and it must at the same time say how the new party should deal with these differences. To do this it must look for points in common with those among the members of the former PDS who are trying to overcome the weaknesses of this party, which are the consequences of its history.

The clarification of these points must be the object of the common forums which have been agreed on, and of the process of open debate which is supposed to lead to the new party, whose foundation and the construction have to be carried out together.

The most important questions that have to be clarified concern participation in government, the structure of the party, its programmatic profile, as well as the question of knowing what role it intends to play in parliamentary assemblies.

On these questions the WASG itself does not have a common view, but it seems nevertheless that there exists a strong tendency to reject participation in government in the conditions that exist at present and in the near future, and to form a political party which will be pluralist, democratic in its structures, which will belong to its members and put itself in the service of the social movements. This heritage, which comes from the process that gave birth to it, must be preserved in the process of unification.

The question of participation in government is the main stumbling-block. In Berlin the WASG will decide how it wants to deal with this issue. For the PDS, many political careers depend on the party staying in government. On its side, participation in government is not an open question - forums and joint conferences won't do anything to change that. In Berlin the motion of the PDS leadership for the regional congress of 3rd and 4th December 2005 spoke of "renewing the option of a "red-red government"; in Saxony-Anhalt, the PDS, anticipating an electoral victory, [24] made the choice of forming a government with the SPD in order to "strengthen the left potential in the regional assembly" (The quotation comes from the motion put to the regional PDS congress).

Within the WASG there is a tendency to play down this conflict as much as possible, in other words, not to deal with the question of participation in government so as not to put the process of fusion in danger. The result of that would be to go into the fusion without any clarification of controversial issues. There is a double pressure to go in this direction: on the one hand the expectations of the electors are invoked, on the other hand, the parliamentary rules of the Bundestag are cited - in other words the risk of seeing the joint parliamentary group juridically invalidated. [25]

Neither of these questions can constitute the central criterion for a political decision. However the pressure is real and no one will argue seriously, in the present state of the discussion and the disputes, for freezing the efforts undertaken to reach unification, because of the attachment of the PDS to participation in government. On the contrary, the WASG must fix itself the objective of using the unification process to launch a critical debate within the PDS on the usefulness and the costs of participation in government.

The majority of the WASG in Berlin decided, at its regional congress on November 2005, to organize a vote of its members on the question of running its own candidates. [26] Since then it has been reproached by the Linkspartei.PDS and by part of the WASG itself with bearing the responsibility for the risk of seeing the common project of the new party fail. However the debate is not over. The WASF can withdraw its own list in favour of a joint list as soon as the Linkspartei.PDS creates the minimum conditions for it. Assuming joint responsibility for the conduct of neo-liberal policies as a minority ally of the SPD is certain not compatible with that. Since the Berlin WASG is being portrayed, including by the media, in the role of a scapegoat, it is necessary for it to say frankly and publicly that on its side it is fighting energetically to take forward the process of unification. If the Linkspartei.PDS in Berlin maintains its present position, it is it which will carry the responsibility of gravely endangering the process of unification. Only a type of party which leaves open political questions whose central nature is recognized, within which the competition between different opinions can be organized without obstacles and which guarantees a maximum permeability to social movements as well as maximum exchanges across national frontiers, seems to offer a way out of this difficult situation. Such a pluralist party is possible on condition that its action and the objectives that it sets for itself are not subordinated to its presence in parliament and in the state apparatus. It is only on this condition that the new party to be built will be to the left to the SPD and will be a factor of progress.

8. The International Socialist Left (isl) sets itself the following tasks:

- It will support in the coming weeks and months the European mobilization and the national campaign against the Bolkestein directive, as well as the national mobilization against the government in the spring of 2006.
- It will encourage the fundamental debate within the trade unions concerning their strategy and will reinforce the trade union left.
- It will participate in the protests against the Hartz IV law and against any exclusion of the unemployed whose allowances have run out and of immigrants.
- It will participate in the preparation of the mobilization against the G8 summit in Heiligendamm [27] in 2007 and will seek in this framework cooperation with the Interventionist Left. [28]
- It will reinforce the efforts to constitute an extra-parliamentary opposition that is broad and capable of acting on the national level.
- It will initiate a debate on the alternatives to capitalism, which can serve as a basis for extra-parliamentary movements as well as for a left opposition in parliament; in doing so it will start from the debates that have taken place over alternatives to the European Constitutional Treaty and circulate these ideas.
- It supports the formation of a joint party between the WASG and the PDS, which must defend in a consistent way the interests of workers and marginalized layers and participates in this framework in the regroupment of anti-capitalist forces; it fights for a pluralist party, which is controlled by its members, which is open and which guarantees the right to form currents; it rejects in present conditions the entry of WASG or the PDS into a government.

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– It seeks to win to this line the members of the WASG as well as the members of the PDS and tries to encourage the establishment of a network of anti-capitalist forces within the two parties.

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[1] The right wing alliance between the Christian Democrats (CDU-CSU) and liberals (FDP) did not win a majority in parliament, having respectively 35.2% and 9.8% of the votes, essentially because of the breakthrough of the PDS list - opened up to the WASG under the name of Linkspartei (Left Party) - which won 8.7% of the votes. See "[The Winner is the Left Party](#)", by Thadeus Pato, International Viewpoint 370, September 2005.

[2] The SPD and the Greens, who made up the outgoing government, won respectively 34.3% and 8.1% of the votes.

[3] The Grand Coalition is an alliance between the Social Democrats and the two Christian Unions which enabled Angela Merkel to become chancellor.

[4] Former SPD President during the latter part of Gerhard Schroder's term of office as chancellor, who is now vice-chancellor and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs.

[5] The German "fundamental law" aims at the improvement and the equalization of the living standards of the citizens of the different lander (the regions which make up the federal republic). Because of the very big differences between the former East Germany and the former West Germany the German ruling class is trying to modify this principle which is considered by neo-liberal ideology to be obsolete.

[6] The DGB is the German trade union confederation: Ver.di is the federation of service union, which with nearly 3 million members is the biggest federation of the DGB.

[7] The Bundestag has been elected for the period 2005 to 2009.

[8] The German government has already gone further than the French government, by deciding at the outset to generalize a trial period of 2 years for all work contracts.

[9] One of the laws reforming unemployment insurance, which largely dismantles the rights of unemployed people, adopted by the Red Green Coalition in 2004 and became law on the 1st of January 2005, although certain aspects of it have not yet been implemented.

[10] The Grand Coalition government has announced its intention of increasing the basic rate of VAT from 16% to 19%, starting in 2007.

[11] The name given to the program of counter-reforms of the Schroder government, of which the law reforming an employment insurance was part. It is the German component of the so-called "Lisbon Strategy".

[12] The WASG (Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice) was formed in 2004, essentially by militants breaking on the left with the SPD.

[13] The mobilizations against the reform of unemployment insurance in the second half of 2004, which were quite strong between August and October 2004, before dying down.

[14] Ver.di is conducting a campaign against the very low wages and the appalling working conditions that are imposed by the Lidl supermarket chain. It has published a Black Book on Lidl and engaged in poster and leafleting campaigns, often together with the Lidl campaign of Attac-Germany.

[15] This new party is still in the process of being formed and should come into existence by the projected fusion between the WASG and the Linkspartei.PDS in the summer of 2007.

[16] The different components of the reform of unemployment insurance.

[17] Workplace councils in Germany have considerable power and financial resources, but are subject to the legal obligation of ensuring good cooperation with the management of the workplace.

[18] In German law a strike can only be used as a last resort, only if it is called by a recognized union and only as a means of support in the framework of collective bargaining.

[19] There is in Germany no national minimum wage, but only negotiated minimum wage levels in different sectors, which does not help workers in sectors where there is no collective bargaining. However for the last two years there has been a debate in the unions over whether they should demand a national legal minimum wage. This demand is supported by the service and hotel and restaurant unions and rejected by the unions of (skilled) workers in engineering and especially in the chemical industry.

[20] The SPD started its turn to neo-liberalism with proposals made by Oscar Lafontaine at the end of the 1980s, but this turn became much sharper under the Schroder government from 1998-99 onwards. At that time Lafontaine defended more or less Keynesian positions.

[21] The PDS participates in governments in the lander of Berlin and Mecklenburg-Pomerania.

[22] In the land of Berlin

[23] The attempts of the PDS to establish a significant electoral base in West Germany during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000 decade were failures.

[24] Regional elections in Saxony-Anhalt

[25] German electoral law forbids alliances between several political parties that are concluded in order to form joint lists and does not allow several parties to put together their members of parliament in order to reach the minimum number required to have a recognized parliamentary group. That is why the WASG candidates had to be on the PDS list for the elections of September 2005.

[26] That is to say a list that would be in competition with the Linkspartei .DS in the Berlin regional elections in September 2006.

[27] Near Rostock on the Baltic coast, in the land of Mecklenburg-Pomaria

[28] The Interventionist Left (IL) is a new network of militants from different tendencies on the radical left which exists on a national level without however being a structured organization and which is in part influence by the ideas of the Italian social centres and those of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. Unlike the large "autonomous" milieu (with which it overlaps) this network puts the "social question" and the working class at the centre of its preoccupations (and not only anti-fascism and anti-racism, mobilizations against the transport of nuclear wastes, gender questions, cultural questions...) and is ready to take part in broad alliances. Some of the components of this network-alliance have a Marxist background or were part of the far left currents of the 1970s: all of them have an "anti-Leninist" identity and they are quite distant from the WASG and distrustful of it - although there were some discussions within it about giving the WASG critical support in the September 2005 election.