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Germany

Die Linke, one year on

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One year after the foundation of the Die Linke (Left) party, commentators on both right and left agree that the political situation in Germany has been changed. Following three regional elections in spring 2008, Die Linke is solidly installed on the landscape [1]. On paper it is now the third biggest party in the country, whether in terms of members, elected representatives, or other holders of paid political functions at all levels of the state, or again in terms of financial strength.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/dielinke27.jpg>]

Die Linke has 72,000 members. It is represented in the Bundestag by 53 deputies; there is not a single big capitalist country where a party explicitly identifying with the left is so well represented. These deputies have been elected by more than 4 million people, and in terms of the old imperialist countries, only the Japanese CP exceeds this score. In the Länder of the east, it is a party with a broad implantation; at the local government level in many areas it is the force that counts, which “exercises responsibility”, and whose power and implantation eclipses all other parties. In the Land of Berlin, Die Linke participates in government with three ministers (senators). In the western Länder, the party has experienced success in all the provincial elections but only in Lower Saxony has it succeeded in attracting more votes than in the federal elections of 2005. For Germany as a whole, the party has 185 regional deputies, 5,561 municipal councillors, 179 mayors, 3 Landrat (elected directors of General Councils) and 59 liaison officers of various types.

A space open to the critique of capitalism

The entire left outside of Die Linke, the social movements – in first place the trade union movement – and a growing number of intellectuals and scientists today look at the new party and are obliged to take account of this new left force in their elaboration and their manner of posing political problems.

At the level of political ideology, Die Linke occupies a terrain abandoned for some years. It has opened the space for a discourse which allows the critique of capitalism and even the demand for socialism. In this sense Die Linke reflects the already old polarisation between the winners and losers from the offensive waged by capital and the parties at its service to restore the rate of profit; it is a reflection of the aggressive “class struggle from above” of all the European governments and employers’ organisations, the reflection of violence, militarisation and growing material insecurity which affects all sectors of society.

On the sociological level, Die Linke represents in part a model of class party supposedly historically transcended, which has shown itself capable of conquering in a very short time a quite considerable stable electorate among the victims of the current policy and among the organisers of social and political resistance. Hence Die Linke clearly represents more than a protest party, on the contrary it is clear that its electoral success does not come from temporary gains from those who would otherwise abstain, but that they are obtained in spite of a rate of participation which does not cease to fall. It mobilises firstly a part of the traditional proletarian electorate of social democracy, which explains why it is above all the SPD which is challenged by the new party, both in terms of membership and voters.

All these factors lead us to consider the emergence of Die Linke as a positive event from an anti-capitalist and socialist perspective. But as always the dialectic means that with progress forces develop which hold it back, which are satisfied with what has already been won, and in the same way there are partisans and members of Die Linke

who are not sufficiently conscious of this progress and who are in fact incapable of understanding that only the pursuit of the evolution to the left and the radicalisation of the party can lead to success.

Structural characteristics

3,000 members have joined the party since its official formation in June 2007. Around a third of the 12,000 members claimed by the WASG (Social Justice and Work Electoral Alternative) have not accompanied the unification with the Linkspartei-PDS (2), have resigned or have ceased to pay their dues and have thus been removed from the membership lists

Nearly three quarters of the membership live in the eastern Länder, a quarter in those of the west. In the east, Die Linke organises almost exclusively the victims of the reintegration of the former GDR into capitalist Germany. Two thirds of them have a university degree but have long since retired. In the East, the average age of members is more than 65. The party has won new members there but loses more, essentially because of their deaths.

Nearly half are women, whereas in the west men dominate more than in the other parties, but the average of 41% over the country as a whole remains presentable. The membership gained since the creation of the party has been almost exclusively male in the west and as a whole the new members are 85% male, 5% under 30, and 1% under 20.

In the west the members are divided into two groups: the new victims of capitalism, those in insecure work and the unemployed on the one hand, and on the other wage earners, among whom those who have experience of higher education represent a large minority. Die Linke is a workers' party which is the specific product of modern capitalism, with a particular contingent of victims of the liquidation of the GDR.

The party is made up of around 2,000 rank and file organisations in the east and 260 in the west. They are nearly all based on administrative subdivisions and correspond to localities. There is only one workplace group. Male-female parity is on the statutes for internal and external elections but is rarely respected at the local level. It is implemented carefully but with difficulty at the regional and intermediary level and at the summit of the party – the two male co-presidents [2] are well known. At the federal level and in the regional parliaments this rule is regularly ignored under the pressure of male cliques. If the electoral lists for different parliaments are broadly parity-based, this is not the case for the assistants to the elected representatives and the party full timers.

The party's administrative apparatus comprises 77 fulltime posts at the head office and 160 for the regional offices. It is financed essentially by state subsidies under the party financing rule and by the dues of the parliamentarians. The average contribution is around 7 Euros per month. Moreover, most of the public expression of the party goes through the parliamentary fractions, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and their public financing. It is then certainly not wrong to consider that the existence of Die Linke depends at a level of 80% on state money, of which there is no need to be ashamed – it has nothing to do with presents from big companies and slush funds – but which should be constantly borne in mind. .

Parliamentary swamp

Left activists who wish to durably change the relationship of forces inside society through this type of organisation should try to take into account these structural brakes on each campaign, each action, to transcend them in practice. But this it is not what happens. There is no effort at basic transformation of the structures by extra parliamentary actions, the setting up of workplace groups and the increasing of the share of financing coming from the dues of members and the gifts of sympathisers. It is not then astonishing that Die Linke is becoming parliamentarised at a very rapid pace. All the activity today turns almost exclusively around electoral campaigns. The party members are

divided into two parts, a great number of paper members who can be mobilised at best during the electoral campaigns, and on the other the activists who group around the elected representatives. This phenomenon is accelerated by three characteristics that no other party presents in such a striking fashion:

â€” In the first place an underlying submission, perceptible above all in the ex-PDS, which yearns to be accepted and taken seriously by the capitalist enemy. The wish expressed by Gregor Gysi to see inscribed on his tomb “And yet we were nice” is a telling anecdotal evidence of this...

â€” Second a fear of the media which is almost clinical. One of the 77 full timers at the central office is regularly occupied in sorting out the “good” and “bad” press articles and calculating the percentage of each.

â€” Thirdly, an authoritarian structure reflected in an allegiance to the presidents, a tailism which is a little sickening and a frenzy for centralisation on the part of the apparatus which ends up in smothering the creativity and imagination, and thus the living potential of the party.

These “qualities” as one can see at nearly every party meeting, are embodied by the old cadres of the PDS in the east and by the old guard of the SPD in the west, trained in the bureaucratic structures of the SPD and the unions. The weight of these elements increases and does not fall, most of those who join now share this approach which is moreover helpful to the increasing number who seek a post or a career.

It remains the fact that Die Linke regularly receives the support of 10% of voters and that it is also a party which on all the big questions and mobilisations, from the anti-war movement, via the march on the G8 summit, actions against the neo-Nazis and challenges to democratic rights, to support for trade union and workplace struggles â€” with the exception of the train drivers strike led by the GDL union [3] â€” has until now energetically supported the anti-capitalist forces of this country and has allowed them to go further than would have been possible if it had not existed. But it is also a party whose whole structural weight leads to the loss of this progressive role, which channels its own forces and smothers them, and which threatens to sink straight into the parliamentary swamp, undoubtedly as minority member of a coalition government.

This process can only be stopped by having an extremely clear consciousness of the weight of the structures as described here, and thanks to the violent and frequent pressure of struggles and social mobilisations. If only one of these two elements is present, things could continue as now, but if both are missing things will go badly.

[1] 1. At the federal elections of September 2005, the electoral alliance of the PDS-Linkspartei and the WASG won 8.7% of the votes and 54 deputies. In regional elections this year, Die Linke has won 7.1% in Lower Saxony, 5.1% in Hesse, and 6.5% in the Land of Hamburg

[2] 2. Oskar Lafontaine, former secretary general of the SPD, and Gregor Gysi, former secretary general of the PDS

[3] 3. This union is not affiliated to the DGB