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Germany

Germany : elections mark significant break

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV419 - December 2009 -

Publication date: Wednesday 30 December 2009

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The German elections of August 30 and September 27 – regional in five Länder and legislative at the federal level – marked a significant break. The bourgeois parties did not win the general election; they even lost a few votes.

In 2005 the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and liberals (FDP) scored 21,282,250 votes, in 2009 they got 20,971,084, or 311,166 votes less. Germany has 80 million inhabitants, 62 million of them eligible to vote, but only 44 million bothered to.

However, the new left wing party, Die Linke, obtained an excellent score and established itself on a lasting basis as fifth biggest party in the German parliament, while the social democrats (SPD) fell back into the “ghetto of 30%” of the 1950s, from whence it had emerged after the rightwards turn of Bad Godesberg.

These two elements have the consequence that the numerical majorities which could allow the constitution of red-red-green governments (that is Die Linke-SPD-Green) in the Länder do not necessarily translate into political majorities. In the Saar region an alternative government foundered because the Greens preferred an alliance with the Christian Democrats and FDP. In Thuringia it was the SPD leader who rejected an alliance with Die Linke – against the wishes of the rank and file of his party. In Schleswig-Holstein the voters elected a red-red-green majority, but due to the regional electoral law the parties of big capital won the majority of seats. In Saxony, the social democrats did not reach the threshold of 10% of votes – a disaster in a region which was once the cradle of the German workers' movement.

It was then only in the Land of Brandenburg that the outgoing SPD prime minister, Matthias Platzeck, agreed to a coalition with Die Linke. This done, he succeeded in making it accept a governmental programme which only contained social liberal positions. Die Linke had requested more jobs in the public sector, while in fact 5,000 will be suppressed. It had proposed the abolition of entry fees for university, but they will be preserved in another form. The programme professes its approval of the Treaty of Lisbon and envisages the construction of new lignite-fuelled thermal power plants. The rank and file of the party has protested strongly against this programme, but it has been accepted under the pressure of Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky.

The SPD leaves a vacuum

The most significant result was the collapse of the SPD vote: it was down to 23%, or 9,990,488 votes – its lowest score since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). For eleven years the SPD was in government. In this period it lost half of its voters while its membership fell below that of the Christian Democrats (barely 500,000 members; at the end of the 1970s it still had a million!)

The Schröder era, continued in the grand coalition, left its traces. Its political line, even if it was in open opposition to its electoral programme (like agenda 2010), was dictated from top to bottom, the contact of the leadership with the intermediary cadres and offices was broken, among the SPD deputies in the Bundestag there were very few trade union functionaries. The SPD is no longer a party which helps ordinary people resolve their problems, or speaks for those left behind by global competition. Trades unionists voted 35% SPD, 21% CDU/CSU. Among non unionised workers it was the opposite: they voted 35% CDU/CSU and 21% SPD (in total, 24% of workers voted for the SPD). The rate of unionisation has fallen worryingly. At the sociological level, it is not a workers' party, most of its members

have an academic qualification. The majority of its voters are either civil servants (29 %) or pensioners (26 %).

Since Schröder the SPD has preached individual responsibility, less state, more private. It has turned towards the more privileged layers, who see themselves "at the centre" of society and have more reserves. It is now divided and no longer knows if it should defend the social state or demolish it. A new generation which will struggle for a real programmatic reorientation is not visible.

The SPD leaves a big vacuum. Until the end of the 1990s it contributed to structuring society, but the turning point of agenda 2010 and the preponderance of the media in the party's internal debates and in its decisions mean that the SPD has lost its footing and this has left a gap in the political structure of society.

Success and new challenges for Die Linke

Die Linke does not fill this vacuum. It only won one sixth of the votes lost by the SPD. It did not make a serious incursion into the abstentionist camp; on the contrary, it lost 350,000 votes among them. In spite of that, it won 5 million votes and scored more than 5% in every L nder, including in the West. In the East it is now the biggest party in Brandenburg, the second biggest in Berlin and in Mecklenburg Vorpommern   two L nder, which have experienced governments with Die Linke participation, it should be said.

But, at least in the West, it is an electoral party, with a certain audience in the trade unions, among students and the intelligentsia, but without real roots in the neighbourhoods and the workplaces. The challenge for Die Linke is twofold: to build these roots and at the same time to provide a clear vision of a non-capitalist and ecological society. There are deficits on these two fields.

The elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), in May 2010, will constitute a big challenge for Die Linke. If it enters the parliament of the most populous Land (with 18 million inhabitants) that would mean another great leap forward. The federation of NRW is, along with Bremen, the one which is most to the left. The right there is very much in the minority and the two left currents   the Anti-capitalist left and the Socialist Left   are dominant. It has just held a congress where it voted for its programme for the coming elections. It demands, among other things the socialisation of the energy sector (one of the main industries in the region), a 30 hour week without loss of wages, starting with the public sector, a free midday meal in all schools and cr ches, a social mobility ticket for the whole region, a demilitarisation of workplaces, the socialisation of Opel and its transformation into an enterprise of ecological mobility. Oskar Lafontaine addressed the delegates with an implicit critique of the programme of the coalition in Brandenburg. "A dismantling of jobs in the public sector should be taboo" he said. The congress even voted an addition to the programme, which marks an implicit but clear break with what is happening in Brandenburg.

There are also risks. The more the party grows in number, the more new members are people without political experience or worse, with the habits of social democracy. The municipal elections at the end of August absorbed a large number of activists, who now sit in the municipal parliaments rather than being involved in the construction of the party. The weight of daily routine could push the party rightwards.

Drift of the Greens

The turn by the Green to coalitions with the parties of big capital seems lasting. The Greens are the party with the highest proportion of university graduates, their programme for a New Green Deal rests on the collaboration and

persuasion of private companies. The CDU has seized this opportunity, making concessions it would never previously have accepted. It conceded the abolition of university entry fees that it had itself introduced in the previous legislative period and promised renewable energies, although new coal based power stations will be built, with a ceiling of 500 MW per station.

It is not the first time that the Greens have experimented with such a coalition (called a "Jamaica" coalition because of its colours: black, yellow, and green). They already exist at a local and regional level, as in Hamburg, where the Greens have paid a high price by approving the construction of a coal powered station of 1600 MW.

Aggressive liberals

The electoral campaign of the FDP was very aggressive, which earned them 1.1 million votes from the Christian Democrats. Their preferred slogans were for a radical reform of the tax system, with a big reduction in its progressive element; a flat rate contribution (thus the same for the banker as for the housewife) to social security; reduced protection against dismissals; and above all more subsidies for companies in financial difficulty.

Because of this the trade unions and social democrats waged a campaign against "the coalition of social coldness" raising the expectation of radical frontal attacks from the beginning. In fact the new government did not begin with frontal attacks, but by small steps, which risked not meeting sufficient resistance and thus opening the door to bigger attacks.

The goals of the FDP obviously come up against the crisis and the fiscal deficit. But also the CDU/CSU wishes to have a "social and democratic image" and compete at this level with the SPD. Angela Merkel has learnt the lesson: in 2005 she led a rightist electoral campaign and the gamble did not pay off. Her score was not enough to form a bourgeois government and she had to form a grand coalition with the SPD. There she changed direction and began to cultivate a social image whose costs were paid by the SPD. The Christian Democrats remain a genuine popular party, winning the votes of 26% of the workers, and even 35% of unorganised workers. There is a social wing and a neoliberal wing. The crisis will sharpen these internal conflicts.

The Merkel II government

The programme of the government bears the mark of the CDU/CSU. The anti-social discourse of the FDP has been rejected; tax reform has been put off to 2013. Apart from this, it is a perplexing document: the new government does not know how to manage the crisis, which it moreover completely underestimated. Its sole hope is the return to growth, preferably next year. In view of that it has even decided to extend the partial unemployment benefit, while aid to companies in difficulties will on the other hand be reduced.

The Opel affair, in which General Motors (GM) has decided not to transfer the company to the consortium formed by the Russian bank Sberbank and the components manufacturer Magna despite the efforts of several governments, at both regional and federal level, has created a climate in public opinion unfavourable to subsidies to companies. The Opel case could become a real disaster: GM has announced 10,000 dismissals in Germany and 50,000 across Europe, and the closure of the Bochum and Eisenach factories in Germany, as well as that in Antwerp in Belgium (in Germany Opel employs 25,000 people in four establishments, including Rüsselsheim and Kaiserlautern in addition to those mentioned). Opel workers will have every opportunity to organise a resistance on the European scale and defeat the plans of GM, indeed take the initiative for a reconversion of production in an

ecological direction. A defeat for the Opel workers would have serious consequences for the class struggle.

Half of industrial enterprises are affected by the crisis, with engineering the hardest hit with 70% of factories in difficulty; 20% are fighting closure. The engineering union IG Metall estimates that in Baden-Württemberg a third of the factories in the sector could be close. The same situation exists in printing and print media. The crisis has also affected the big store chains: Karstadt, an up market store, wants to close 11 establishments, while others like Woolworth or Hertie have already closed. A wave of concentration of regional banks is expected; here it is above all the European Commission which is pushing for their sale and privatisation.

The government, while decreeing austerity measures in health, the pensions system and the management of unemployment, is borrowing at a record level: 86 billion Euros for 2010. For 2009 it has indicated to Brussels a fiscal deficit of 3.7% of GDP, for 2010 a deficit of 6% of GDP is forecast. Germany has joined those countries of the European Union (EU) not respecting the stability pact – now 20 out of 27 countries. Nonetheless, the new finance minister has promised a rectification of the budget by 2013.

The first measures have already been announced. Old age insurance will be accompanied by a second private pillar; the employer contribution for social security will be capped at the current level, whereas the contributions of employees and pensioners will increase. Pensions will be frozen for at least 5 or 6 years (the grand coalition had passed a law forbidding them from being reduced). The precarious sector will be extended. The jobs agency, which had been fundamentally restructured in line with the Hartz laws, will be reformed again. The Christian Democrats support the British model: care for people not integrated into the labour market should be taken on by local government, which has no budget for this.

Climate policy – where Angela Merkel claims to be at the cutting edge – is a farce. While the government is aiming at an 80% cut in CO2 emissions by 2050, it is building new coal fuelled power stations which will bury their carbon dioxide (a technique which has not yet been elaborated or experimented with). Renewable energies should have priority, but at the same time the closure of nuclear power stations at the end of their activity will be postponed.

The impression which dominates is that the government does not know how to define priorities in this area, that it simultaneously wants nuclear power, coal, Russian gas, Central Asian oil, Saharan solar power, Norwegian wind power and so on. This when Germany is already an energy exporter.

Difficult resistance for workers

The response of the unions to this programme of salvaging of big capital is completely inadequate. On the night of the elections, the head of the DGB union confederation, Michael Sommer, and that of IG Metall, Berthold Huber, expressed hope that the social wing of Christian Democracy will see that the worst does not happen. Opel is a good example of the majority orientation in IG Metall: it rests on state subsidies to safeguard the “industrial substance”. While the GM multinational shows contempt for the decision of the German government, the union reacts with demonstrations and warning strikes without any strategy of struggle. For such a strategy in the current situation is only possible by going beyond capitalist logic. To obtain the buyout of Opel by Magna and Sberbank, Opel workers renounced some millions in wages per year, in consideration for 10% of the shares, following the US model. Now GM wants to benefit from the same concession. Huber has let it be understood that the unions would not ask for wage increases beyond the rate of inflation. The bosses have immediately made it known that they would instead be pressing for a wage freeze in 2010.

The main workers' union, Ver.di, pursues a more political debate. It demands a programme of investment of 40 billion

Euros to create new jobs in the public sector, a legal minimum wage (which still does not exist in Germany), a longer period for unemployment benefit (it is currently a year) and the reintroduction of the tax on wealth. Nonetheless there is a big gap between words and results in collective agreements.

Resistance to the crisis depends on the capacity of unions to organise struggles. The DGB now has 6.4 million members (there are 38 million employees in total in Germany). The level of unionisation remains high in the big industries like cars and chemicals, but it is weak in small and medium industry and above all in private services (a sector in strong growth due to the outsourcing of these services by the big companies), where unions are forbidden. The discontent is very strong given the policy followed by the union leader and union membership continues to fall. But there is no culture of spontaneous struggles and it is very rare that the union teams start them.

Minority currents in the unions demand that they support the social struggle in the broad sense of the term and an anti-capitalist perspective. In IG Metall, a small current (led by Hans Jürgen Urban, a member of the union leadership) has taken up the old social democrat ideas of the 1920s, demanding an economic democracy and a stronger regulation of the market. The handicap of such an orientation is that it does not prepare a confrontation with capital but on the contrary is based on the approval of the employers in the context of a new compromise. A more radical current in Ver.di and IG Metall demands the nationalisation of key industries and a radical reduction in working hours. It has a small influence in the workplaces, but remains very much in the minority. At Opel, a radical nucleus "Gegenwehr ohne Grenzen (GOG, Resistance without frontiers)" exists only in the factory at Bochum. GOG demands that the workers vote on the concessions made by the unions in the negotiations "and calls for a vote against " but it proposes no alternative beyond this; the other employees have neither the habit nor the experience of a confrontation with the employers and do not know how to define any object of struggle other than their jobs and wages.

Nonetheless, this year examples of factory occupations and conversion of production have taken place in small companies and these experiences have not been a defeat. In addition a significant student struggle is underway against the Bologna reforms, the lack of liberty in studies and university entry fees. In mid-November faculties were occupied, in more than a dozen cities, following the example of Austrian students. It was the SDS, a student organisation linked to Die Linke, but formally independent "most of its members are not party members" which played the main role in the organisation of this struggle.

Finally, a network of local anti-crisis committees is preparing a new national demonstration next spring. However local activities are still very weak. Die Linke will bear a big responsibility in the encouragement and organisation of local and national struggles.