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Germany

Towards a new, liberating party of the Left

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This contribution seeks to give a broad outline of the significance of the results of the 18th September federal elections, and at the same time give some information concerning the orientation around which our members are taking part in the process of building a new broad left party with a mass base. This orientation is of course the subject of a debate, a debate which will continue in the aggregate meetings of ISL members, at a regional level in North Rhine Westphalia on October 15th and on the federal level at the beginning of December 2005. The author, who is involved in this debate, takes responsibility as an individual for the present formulation of this orientation, because the debate could well introduce important nuances, which might differ from what is said here, at least in some details.

The big parties were the big losers in the federal elections of September 18th, 2005. Compared to 2002, the Christian-conservative CDU/CSU, with 35.2 per cent, lost 3.3 per cent. The SPD dropped by 4.3 per cent and finished with 34.3 per cent - more than had been anticipated, because the ferociously neo-liberal line of Angela Merkel, the CDU/CSU candidate for Chancellor, led to a loss of votes to the advantage not only of the SPD, but also of the original advocates of unbridled neo-liberalism, the liberals of the FDP, who finished spectacularly with 9.8 per cent. The Greens marked time with 8.1 per cent of the vote. The right-wing extremists made progress, but didn't manage a breakthrough. The big winner, in reality, was the Left Party, supported by the WASG, with 8.7 per cent of the vote, which represents more than double the vote obtained by the PDS, which got 4 per cent in 2002, thus failing to pass the 5 per cent barrier, thereby reducing its presence in the Bundestag to two MPs from Berlin who had been directly elected in their constituencies.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/GysiLotzerLafontaine-2.jpg>]

Gregor Gysi, Ulla L  tzer, Oskar Lafontaine

In the old regions of the West, the Left Party - the Left, for short - nearly got over the 5 per cent barrier, obtaining 4.9 per cent (the small Saar region can be declared "eastern", since the Left Party won more than 18 per cent of the vote there!). That is very important and it is linked to the new factor, to the WASG and to the unitary dynamic that generated a lot of hope among the mass of workers and of those who are relegated to the fringes of society. Because previously, in the West, the forces of the Left didn't manage much more than one per cent of the vote. It was in May 2005, in the North Rhine-Westphalia region, that the WASG demonstrated the potential that was there by winning 2.2 per cent of the vote, "a second" after it had been formed, whereas the PDS stood alone at the same election and finished with 0.9 per cent of the vote.

In absolute figures, nearly 4 million people voted for the Left Party, 960,000 of whom had still voted for the SPD in 2002. The Left Party furthermore won over 390,000 voters who had abstained in 2002, 280,000 who had voted CDU/CSU, 220,000 from the Greens and 90,000 from the liberals of the FDP. All of that is as significant as the sociological aspect, because the Left Party's electors are especially workers, those in work and those without. To complete the picture we have to add that the SPD lost 640,000 to the Christian conservatives, while the latter lost 1,250,000 to the FDP! Moreover, non-participation in elections also increased: the CDU lost 740,000 votes to the "party" of the non-electors, and the SPD a bit more than half a million.

It goes without saying that the class struggle wing of trade unionists acclaimed the victory of the Left Party. But it also has to be said that the official leaderships of the DGB also welcomed it, while pointing out that there was a "left majority" of 51 per cent in the Bundestag against the CDU/CSU and the FDP, therefore against the preferred political forces of the employers' associations. There is the beginning of an important change in the unions: social-democratic hegemony over them is now seriously breached. But if there is a "left majority" in the Bundestag - which is rather

doubtful - there will not in any case be a left policy, but very probably a "black-red" (CDU/CSU-SPD) Grand Coalition, with the SPD as junior partner, which will continue more than ever the neo-liberal policies of the Schröder government. This will accentuate political differentiation within the unions and very probably lead to new waves of social mobilisations and political dissidence.

It is clear that the result of the federal elections of September 18th, 2005 in Germany marks a significant turning point in the political situation in Germany. Fifty-one per cent of the electorate voted to the left of the Christian conservatives and the liberals, which is not the expression of a clear rejection of neo-liberalism, but is nonetheless a rejection of anti-social austerity policies that were even more brutal than those of the defunct coalition of the SPD and the Greens. The representatives of capital who had campaigned for a "black-yellow" (CDU/CSU-FDP) government were clearly very disappointed after these elections.

Without the good results of the Left Party, it would not have been possible to defeat the black-yellow threat. For the first time in decades, there is now a chance to build a political force in the West and the East of the country which could break social-democratic hegemony in the trade union movement and re-conquer the political independence of the working class. That is giving considerable encouragement to the resistance to neo-liberal policies, to the mobilisations against the increasingly severe attacks on social gains and against militarist and imperialist adventures. One of the consequences will very probably be to make it possible to re-launch, among the broad masses, the debate on the socialist alternative to the destructive and inhuman capitalist mode of production. That is why the ISL has decided to be part and parcel of this process.

But from the beginning, there is a danger of missing the chance by organising a rapid fusion between the WASG and the Left Party, orchestrated from on high. The substantial apparatus of the ex-PDS, by co-opting elements chosen from the leading layer of the WASG, while relying on the support of the parliamentary group, which is on the one hand clearly dominated by members of the Left Party and on the other largely dominated by MPs without clear anti-capitalist convictions, would like to limit the personnel which is going to elaborate the programme, the statutes and the profile of the new party to a narrow leading layer. That can only lead to a simple addition of the members of the Left Party (70,000) and of the WASG (15,000) under the tutelage of a leadership which will more or less rapidly take the road of adaptation.

The ISL, on the contrary, is proposing, together with a certain number of structures and members of the WASG, and also of the Left Party, to launch a broad movement for the formation of a new left party, calling on everyone to take part in open forums to discuss the programmatic and organisational bases, without excluding anyone, and especially without excluding the anti-capitalist and Marxist currents and all those who fear a fresh disappointment, which would be the result of a triumph of substitutionism and of adaptation to the mechanisms and the consensus of established politics.

The first problem to be discussed is the necessity of freeing ourselves from any co-responsibility for the neo-liberal policies of social democracy. At a federal level, the problem does not seem to be posed at present, because the SPD leadership rejects any idea of cooperation with the Left Party in the Bundestag. But already four Left Party MPs have proposed voting, if necessary, for Schröder against Merkel. They were quickly disciplined: this is no time to do such a thing! Our electoral and party base could only interpret it as supporting neo-liberal policies! Nevertheless, Gysi, Lafontaine and the others constantly repeat that in a few years from now, with a changed SPD, everything could look different...

But there is a very present problem: the participation of the Left Party in regional governments in Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. And there is a big movement in the Berlin WASG that is opposed to the idea of fusing with a party that is implementing neo-liberal austerity policies at the regional level, as junior partner to the SPD. An animated discussion is taking place around the proposal for an autonomous candidacy of the WASG in the 2006

Berlin regional elections, if the Left Party does not withdraw from the governmental coalition. And there, the question of the rhythm and the method of forming the new party and the question of the content of its policies are closely linked to each other: the leadership of the Left Party wants to rule out the possibility of a rival candidacy in Berlin by a rapid fusion with a WASG whose relatively few members in Berlin will not weigh too heavily in the balance and will not manage to impose the end of participation in the Berlin government.

An important fundamental problem is the absence of an alternative to capitalism as a social system. The “democratic socialism” in the programme of the Left Party does not signify the struggle for another society, but is a vague ethical reference, quite compatible with a pragmatic politics which does not in any way come up against the limits of the established social order. The programme of the WASG formulates criticisms of capitalism, without having a clear anti-capitalist reference point.

We who are fighting for a socialist democracy, for a classless society on the global scale, know very well that the crisis of credibility of the socialist alternative remains is still very serious. We do not want to impose our vision, but we argue for a thorough debate on the question of the alternative to capitalism, starting from what should be the general consensus: we all want an economic system which is not governed by the race for maximum profit and by competition, but by social needs and ecological responsibility. Such a system can only be based on social ownership of the large-scale means of production, democratically self-managed.

It is not a question of discussing this alternative in the abstract. In fact, this question is linked to the problem of concrete demands. Without a horizon that goes beyond really existing capitalism, it will not be possible to be consistent in the struggle for immediate demands that are in the interest of the workers and the marginalized layers in society. Without wanting to go beyond the capitalist system it is not possible to resist the argument of our adversaries: everything which is socially just but not compatible with the race for maximum profit and for the strongest position of one's own nation against all other nations, will be sacrificed to “realism”. How can you want to impose a significant reduction of working hours without loss of wages, how can you defend social gains and impose an improvement in the living condition of the workers and the marginalized layers of society, without being ready to challenge the sacrosanct private ownership of the means of production, the banks and the insurance companies? How can you organize resistance against the orgies of privatisation, how can you fight for a re-civilization of social relations without having in mind the need to reorganize society on new bases, different from those of today, which are dominated by the market, monopoly and the power of the big multinational trusts?

Internationalism must be part and parcel of the new party that is to be built. This begins with the pan-European struggle for a minimum social income and the reduction of working hours without loss of wages, continues with the refusal of military interventions and must be completed by establishing contact with all the forces in Europe that are to the left of social democracy and are anti-capitalist - we do not agree with confining ourselves to participating in the European Left Party.

The orientation and the profile of the party that is to be built are linked to the type of party that we want to build. In our opinion, we have to start by posing the question of why the SPD and so many other parties have become what they are today. One of the big problems is the substitutionism of leaderships, party apparatuses and especially parliamentary groups (not to speak of Millerandist ministers...) which tend on every occasion to depart from the initial emancipatory objectives and adapt to the mechanisms and the pro-capitalist consensus of established bourgeois politics.

In the last analysis, this mechanism is a product of the social division of labour and can only be surmounted by a qualitative leap in the self-activity and self-organization of the masses. That is why it is not enough to ask the members of the parliament of a left party to play the role of a loudspeaker for social movements. We must ask more: that all their activity be directed to encouraging mobilizations, and encouraging self-organization within mobilizations,

in other words to the extra-parliamentary struggle. Besides, our demands have no chance of being realized without a big social mobilization and a confrontation with capital which is the only thing that could really change the relationship of forces in society.

But while we are waiting for these big changes in the social and political climate, we need a party which ceaselessly encourages the activity of its members, therefore a democratically organized party that enables its members to control the leaderships, the apparatus, the parliamentary groups, and to determine the political orientation and activity. It must be a pluralist, open party which does not exclude currents on the pretext that they are too "radical". The debate on the strategic orientation must be conducted over a long period and without exclusives, with the right for everyone - not only for the Keynesians, but also for the anti-capitalist forces - to express themselves and to address the entire party.

Already, the weight of the apparatus and the leadership of the Left Party has proved to be a serious problem and an obstacle to the objective of building a broad new party with a mass base. Before the federal elections, time was short and we had to act quickly. Now the leadership of the Left Party wants a rapid fusion, organized and orchestrated from on high. In the WASG there is resistance to this, and so the leadership of the WASG is expressing the need for an open process which will go beyond just the fusion of the two existing forces, a process with open forums.

In the meantime, the new parliamentary group is preparing its work. It is the members of the central apparatus of the ex-PDS in Berlin who have been taken on as collaborators, while their posts in the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus are going by cooptation to chosen leading members of the WASG. So already the weight of this apparatus, which is difficult to control, is great. And it goes without saying that politically, it is the weight of the partisans of coalition politics at the regional level which is being reinforced.

For the moment, that remains on the regional level. For the moment, the top leadership of the Left Party, the WASG and the parliamentary group rule out any cooperation with the SPD and reject the idea, for example, of voting for Schröder against Merkel, or for another SPD candidate for chancellor. But in the longer term - and both Gysi and La Fontaine continually repeat it - there is an orientation towards governmental collaboration with the SPD on the federal level too. To this we have to counterpose an orientation towards social mobilizations - without unity of action in the streets and in the workplaces, unity on an institutional level can only accelerate all the tendencies towards adaptation. And the SPD, up to now in any case, is definitely no longer a party of mobilization.

Our approach to the new party that is to be built is not "entryist" in the traditional sense that the term had in our movement. We want to build this party loyally, in an open process and by encouraging a broad and plural dialogue on the orientation to adopt and on how to function. At the same time, within this broad process, we want to push forward the formation of the anti-capitalist and internationalist current, because it seems to us that it is essential for it to be articulated in a way that is comprehensible, credible and strong. Our organisation has no intention of behaving as a "faction" in the process and does not impose discipline on its members within the WASG, the Left Party and the new party that is to be built. In any case, if it did, that could only poison relations with the other members of the new party. But our members share deeply-held programmatic convictions and regularly discuss and decide on the basic orientation around which they work in this broad framework, ready to take on responsibilities and without repudiating their political identity.

We have already learned from practical experience that this approach can pose problems. In the broad framework of the WASG, of the Left Party and of the new party that is to be built, our members can have different responsibilities at different levels of leadership, play different roles, find different allies - people with reformist socialist convictions who have a strong penchant for "Realpolitik" or people who do not always have socialist convictions, but have sentiments that are emancipatory, democratic and anti-apparatus, for example. That can create conflicts and it has created conflicts. The only non-administrative way of countering these effects seems to us to be the reinforcing of our

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organisation as a framework for discussion, taking a decision when there are differences and formulating our position
- without imposing it mechanically on the activists, but stating publicly what is the opinion of our small political current.