

Germany left parties merge

# “Die Linke”, a new party between hope and adaptation

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As of June 16, 2007 at 16.36h, the Linkspartei.PDS (Left Party. of Democratic Socialism) and the WASG (Electoral Alternative For Jobs and Social Justice) no longer exist. After two years of preparations, they formally merged to create the new party Die Linke (The Left). The previous day the last separate congresses had taken place, agreeing by a large majority to the unification of the two parties.

The Linkspartei.PDS, based above all in the east of the country, has 60,000 members and the WASG nearly 11,500. Before the fusion congress, the members of the two parties had been asked to vote for or against the fusion. In the Linkspartei.PDS, a large majority was in favour. In the WASG, it was a lot less clear: only slightly less than 50% of its members participated in the ballot, and even with a large majority inside this half of party members, in fact only a minority of its members actively voted for the fusion.

This reflects the fact that the founding enthusiasm of 2004 in the ranks of the WASG has run out of steam, and it is fairly probable that a part of the membership of the WASG will not be members of the new part. Some WASG members, conscious of the specific identity and roots of their young party, see the fusion as a colonisation by a party which is stronger in numbers and disposed of a broadly dominant apparatus, together with the common fraction in the Bundestag and a rather administratively oriented personnel in the ex-GDR.

## Regional electoral success in Bremen

However, since the regional elections in the small Land of Bremen and since the fusion is now seen as an accomplished fact, there has been a new rise in the influence and dynamic of Die Linke. Let's look first on the results of May 13, 2007 in Bremen.

The governing parties lost, respectively, 4.1% (CDU) and 5.5% (SPD), and the opposition parties gained: the liberals of the FDP a little, the Greens a lot (3.6% to reach 16.4%) and Die Linke (common candidacy of the Linkspartei.PDS and the WASG) spectacularly (6.7% to reach 8.4%). In the polls the day before these elections, Die Linke was predicted to get only 5%!

This result for Die Linke is significant in several respects. It should be recalled that, towards the end of the 1970s, an electoral success for the Greens precisely in Bremen announced their breakthrough at the federal level. And if Die Linke, for the two years of existence of its fraction in the Bundestag, always scored between 8% and 10% in the polls, everybody knew that the electoral implantation in the East counted for a lot, whereas in many western regions, Die Linke (that is the Linkspartei.PDS and the WASG together) remained largely below the 5% barrier. With results largely above this barrier in the west we can then effectively expect new electoral progress.

The result in Bremen is also significant as to the content of the electoral campaign which was clearly oppositional, whereas the Linkspartei.PDS which co-governs with the SPD in the Land of Berlin lost nearly half of its electorate in the regional elections (but has continued to co-govern!). The results in Bremen have then a tendency to encourage those who are fighting Millérandism [\[1\]](#) in the new party.

Recent polls following the foundation congress confirm the ascendant electoral tendency of Die Linke. According to the Forsa institute, the SPD has lost 2 points to fall to 25%, the CDU/CSU one point to fall to 37%, while Die Linke has gained one point to reach 12%, becoming the biggest opposition party, overtaking the FDP liberals (10%) and the Greens (10%). According to the Emnid institute of June 19, 2007, which gives 36% to the CDU/CSU and 28% to the SPD, Die Linke again has 13%, 3 points more than both the FDP and the Greens.

### **Perspectives of growth**

Another poll indicates in more spectacular fashion that 25% of the German electorate "could imagine" voting for Die Linke! However, there is not only the electoral aspect. According to yet another poll, 10% of the members of the SPD (now down to a little more than half a million) "could imagine" leaving their party to join Die Linke. And if the SPD is subject to an erosion of its influence in the trade union world, it is Die Linke which profits from it. A considerable number of union activists, but also a section of the officials and even the full-timers are beginning to turn towards Die Linke. Even a part of the union leaderships at the federal level are beginning to treat Die Linke as at least a second interlocutor at the political level. Everything is still to play for, but this is a real tendency confirmed by the experience of our union activists, above all in engineering (IG Metall) and the services union (Ver.di).

If then a part of the membership of the former WASG (2,000? 3,000?) will probably not join the new united party, we can at the same time expect a certain influx of new members, in their majority of social democratic origin. What does this mean for the evolution of the party and more precisely for the clearly anti-capitalist tendencies in the party? It is an open question, because there are contradictory elements to take into account. Certainly there will be people attracted by the perspective of careers, above all at the level of the communal and regional levels. The parliamentary routine at its level risks strengthening the tendencies to the adaptation of the party. On the other hand, this influx of members will reflect an advance of political consciousness towards the left, and thus "the battle for the heads" of these new members is not lost in advance for consistent anti-capitalist tendencies. And so it is not lost in advance for those like us, who oppose a strategy of transitional demands to the neo-Keynesian perspective dominant in the party but unrealistic in the context of contemporary capitalism.

## **Remobilisations**

A lot will depend, as always, on the social climate, mobilisations and the development of the class struggle. The mobilisation against the G8 summit was an undeniable success, and with that there is probably — all proportion guarded — a section of the new young generations which is attracted by radical anti-capitalist perspectives. But there is also a renewal of the defensive struggle of employees, as shown symbolically in several weeks of strike action at Telekom, in the face of threats of a drastic wage rate cuts and in increase in unpaid working hours. For the first time in a long time, strike days are rising in Germany. Add to that the fact that a majority of the German population (at least in the polls) are opposed to the deployment “outside the frontiers” of the Bundeswehr (German army) which, at least according to the Grundgesetz (the German Constitution), has no other mission than defence of the country against possible assailants.

The tough neoliberal policies, insolent employers offensives, ferocious anti-social austerity measures and orgies of unbridled privatisation could in part pan out in a positive fashion, building support for Die Linke and creating openings to radical political thought, including Marxism as well as socialist strategic ideas going from a radical reformism to a “revolutionary realism” in the style of Rosa Luxemburg.

At the same time, there is still a great risk of seeing the participants collapse into protest movements and defensive movements out of resignation. Because they cannot win. Either they lose, or they are subject to the shoddy compromises which contribute to weaken wage earners and their allies. Today, a real class struggle, a mobilisation of millions including mass strikes and an active and democratic self-organisation inside such a mobilisation would be necessary to reverse the relationship of forces and impose both an end to the neoliberal and employers offensives and the realisation of new gains. At the same time, such a movement would put on the agenda perspectives of going beyond the capitalist system. Nobody can predict if there will be such a mobilisation in the coming years.

## **Radical discourse and its limits**

At the party political level, in any case, for the moment, a radical attitude pays. And it is above all Oskar Lafontaine with his well-developed instinct as a politician who has understood and who better than all the leaders at the summit of the new party Die Linke, employs a highly rebellious and radical rhetoric, situating himself on the far left and perhaps even beyond what one could call the officially accepted framework for the established political world in Germany.

That is why Lafontaine, towards the end of his speech to the founding congress of Die Linke in Berlin, stressed the necessity of being — or becoming! — “credible”. It is a diplomatic way of saying that he is not in agreement with the policy of co-governance in the Land of Berlin, or the PDS — and today Die Linke — participating in a subaltern position in the neoliberal management of the SPD. He understands well that this policy could damage the electoral rise of Die Linke. But it should be said also that this does not stop the same Oskar Lafontaine from favouring a possible future coalition with the SPD (and perhaps the Greens) at the federal level, perhaps even from 2009! Of course, he always adds that for this, the SPD would have “to change”. This would be his personal triumph against the current generation of SPD leaders who have treated him as a pariah since his resignation as minister and party leader, and who are now very nervous and can find no way out of their uncomfortable role as junior partner of the Christian conservatives and the growing pressure to their left. But how would the SPD change? And who, were there an arithmetical majority to the left of the Christian conservatives and liberals in 2009, would be able to make the diagnosis and

proclaim its change “sufficient”? Probably Oskar Lafontaine, skilful politician and brilliant communicator.

## The struggle of the isl

We as the isl (international socialist left — one of the two organisations of the Fourth International in Germany) are participating in the construction of Die Linke. One of our members, Thies Gleiss, was elected to the federal directorate at the founding congress. Another, Wolfgang Zimmermann, is spokesperson of the party in North Rhine-Westphalia. Others have official functions at the regional or local level, notably Hermann Dierkes who leads the fraction of Die Linke in the communal parliament of Duisburg. We decided to participate in the construction of this party without abandoning our revolutionary Marxist convictions.

That means that we fight for an anti-Millérandist majority, and participate in the “Antikapitalistische Linke” left tendency inside the party. We try at the same time to encourage a long term strategic debate to make understood the necessity of questioning the system, if only so as to defend consistently the interests of wage-earners and the weakest in society. To this end, we support SALZ e.V., an association for political education close to the WASG, and, at another level we participate in the “Marxist Dialogue” which, at the second Marxist Conference, from April 20-22, 2007, attracted 700 people to Berlin, and which has created a stable plural coordination to continue this dialogue and organise a new meeting after the congress in Berlin on October 13, 2007 on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October revolution and of Lenin’s “State and Revolution”.

Certainly, the revolutionary and radical left circles have for the moment an air of crumbling and decomposition, linked to some extent to the success of Die Linke which could marginalize them still further. Some of these circles were always or are now outside the party. In Berlin, the BASG – successor to the rebel WASG in Berlin, which presented itself in the regional election against the PDS and against the opinion of the majority of the national leadership — does not participate in Die Linke and continues to fight under new forms against the policy of co-governance. Like our comrade Angela Klein, in Berlin, we support this approach.

Together with others, we call for a meeting of currents and individuals of a consistent anti-capitalist consciousness “inside and outside” the new party on October 14, 2007 in Berlin. This will discuss a first balance sheet of the fusion as well as common activities at the level of extra-parliamentary actions, education work and the possible creation of a durable coordination of forces and individual in Germany who wish to replace the capitalist system with an economy based on solidarity, a socialist democracy.

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### **P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] 1. From the name of Alexandre Millerand (1859-1943), lawyer and journalist, elected as a socialist deputy for the Seine in 1885. His entry into the government of Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau in 1899 was met with disapproval by Rosa Luxemburg and Jules Guesde. He evolved further to the right and in 1914 created the Ligue républicaine nationale which supported the imperialist war. He replaced Georges Clemenceau as president of the Council in January 1920 and was elected president of the French Republic (September 1920).