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DIE LINKE IS A SUCCESSFUL PARTY

HOWEVER, IT IS ABLE TO DO TOO LITTLE WITH THIS SUCCESS

Cornelia Hildebrandt from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin captures the contradictions in DIE LINKE's considerable potential, the various double binds it finds itself in, due to its mixed reality as a Volkspartei in the East and largely protest party in the West, along with the paradoxical implications of the crisis for the party. The statistical data help in forming an idea of the party's reality.

DIE LINKE reached 11.9% of the national vote in 2009, its best electoral results so far. It is now represented in the Bundestag with the largest group (76 deputies) so far. DIE LINKE is present in 13 of 16 regional parliaments and is in government in two federal states together with the Social Democrats. On the state level it has more parliamentarians than the Greens and the FDP and it has about 6,000 municipal elected officials. Also in comparison to other left parties in Europe, DIE LINKE is successful and strong, with the largest country delegation in the left grouping GUE/NGL in the European Parliament.

The party has more than 77,000 members. In the East German federal states it is a Volkspartei [major cross-class party] with 50,000 members and about 4,500 parliamentarians on the local level. Its electoral results constantly remain above 20%. In the West German federal states the LINKE is above all a protest party with a large participation of trade-unionists. In the West German federal states it has electoral results between 5 and 8%.

DIE LINKE has changed the party system, so that now Germany has a five-party system with an open competition between various coalition options for the Conservatives (CDU), for the Social Democrats (SPD), for the Greens and for the Liberals (FDP). This situation of open competition and the decreasing bonds of the two big parties, the CDU and SPD, [to their bases] makes possible new two- or three-party coalitions. This is a challenge and at the same time an opportunity for DIE LINKE, which has reintegrated the social question into the political system and so could profile itself as an independent part of a red-green project.

DIE LINKE has influence on public discussion wherever minimum wage, the continuation of neoliberal labor-market laws or pensions questions are discussed. At the same time it has hardly any influence on black-yellow (i.e. CDU and liberal) policies.

DIE LINKE is benefitting neither from the crisis, which it has analyzed and predicted long ago, nor from the weakness of the black-yellow coalition. On the contrary, DIE LINKE is stagnating in the opinion polls. It has to take care that its image of being the party of social justice does not fade away.

WHY IS THIS SO?

1. At present there is no real red-red-green [SPD, LINKE, Greens] power-political option.

The strength of DIE LINKE is now coming up against the weakness of the Social Democrats. In the 2009 Bundestag elections the SPD reached its worst result -23.0% of votes. It lost over 6 million votes, of which 2 million went to the non-voters. Since 1998 the SPD has lost half of its electorate. In view of this weakness, which was evident already before the 2009 elections, and in view of the SPD's coalition statement that it will not go into a coalition with DIE LINKE, there were no real power-political alternatives to the CDU composed of red-red-green in 2009. In contrast to 2005 there was also no arithmetical majority for the left camp.

2. The parties of the social-state oriented left camp are currently unable to form coalitions.

The red-green government policy (1998–2005) of dismantling the social state and democracy, of the privatization of public basic services, the growing gap between higher and lower wages, as well as the lowering of the wage share of national income from 72% in 2000 to 64% in 2007, the lack of an ecological turn and finally the readiness to take part in new wars, has clearly shrunk the possibility of cooperation on the federal level between the SPD and Greens on the one side and DIE LINKE on the other. The SPD's stable opinion poll numbers of 27% to 28% and the unusually high poll results for the Greens, stable over 15%, lead both parties to ignore or undervalue the LINKE as a party incapable of politics and government, deploying also anti-communist feeling. DIE LINKE, for its part, largely formulates its position in the political system by its difference and confrontation with the SPD and Greens. DIE LINKE demands that the SPD adopt a fundamental change of direction, especially a retreat from their neoliberal reform policy. At present the left camp is not for a common project.

3. At present there is neither a political nor a social majority for a red-red-green alliance, with merely 32 % of SPD supporters, 46 % of the Greens and only 27 % of the population favoring it. Also among trade-unionists there are no majorities for a red-red-green alliance. At the same time there are no serious attempts coming from the Greens or the SPD to strive for a red-red-green project.

This situation coincides with the relatively weak social protests, for example those against the unloading of the burdens of the crisis onto the socially weakest – in complete distinction to the citizens' protests against large-scale construction projects and black-yellow nuclear policy.

4. DIE LINKE remains consistently social in its demands. DIE LINKE is consistent in being a party for social justice. It consistently demands: minimum wages of 8–10 Euros, the extension of the public sector. It is against pension at 67, the privatization of public basic services, against foreign intervention of the Bundeswehr. DIE LINKE has still not been able to go beyond its oppositional role, which it has shared with the Social Democrats and Greens since 2009. It points to its unique characteristics as being the only consistent force for peace and the party of social justice, although central demands of the party such as minimum wage, positions on outsourced work, positions on pension at 67 have been – though inconsistently of course – taken over at least verbally in a publicly effective way by the SPD. DIE LINKE describes itself as a party that stands for system change, for democratic socialism. DIE LINKE sees social and political majorities as preconditions for this. It has still not developed a strategy to achieve these.

5. DIE LINKE is on the road to a strategic dilemma. It is developing itself into a radical system-critical opposition party, which, though it does not fundamentally exclude government participation as a strategic option, sets the bar for this so high that under the concrete conditions, especially of the limits imposed by the debt on the federal and state levels as a result of the crisis and of the necessary debt reduction of public budgets, government participation must be de facto excluded even in the federal states. And this, although DIE LINKE is the strongest force, or the second strongest, in most East German federal states.

6. The party is currently working on its programmatic-strategic self-determination. DIE LINKE connects its alternative social conception of democratic socialism to an emancipatory, transformative process. Part of this involves the pushing back and breaking of the dominance of capital over economy, society and nature. This has to be tied to an alternative mode of work, life and production. However, this is precisely what is not being done in the new program draft. The relationship between break and evolutionary development, the question of property and the alternative shaping of state and society, remains unclear. Demands for transformations of property are uncritically inserted alongside the injunction to defend the social constitutional state, which doubtless is something that should be defended. The focus on the question of power occludes the open questions of alternative production and reproduction, which run through the program draft like red threads, as in the question of growth, of a (narrow) conception of labor, and in the socialization forms of property.

7. DIE LINKE must work out the property question in a direction that is social-transformative, social-ecological and participatory.

In reducing the transformational process to the question of property and redistribution and in the lack of organic link to social-ecological transformation strategies there is the danger of DIE LINKE becoming a social-justice party that is structurally conservative. At the same time, however, the 2010 protests also show that large majorities in the population have long since connected the ecological question to ones of the shaping of society and are ready to deploy themselves in the confrontations around an «ecological» or green capitalism. This is linked to the demand for more transparent, participatory citizens' politics. In terms of the whole party up to now, DIE LINKE stands for both of these causes only in an incipient way.

8. DIE LINKE is still a party divided in several ways. It unites anti-capitalists and capitalism critics, communists, socialists, left social democrats, Trotskyists, feminists, movement-leftists, left intellectuals, among several other components. In it are represented classical revolutionary communist, social-state-oriented, Trotskyist, reform socialist, transformative, bourgeois-humanist, spontaneist-trade-union and emancipatory-libertarian positions. It is an illustration of the rainbow left in a single party. It is plural in relation to diverse understandings of politics and party, images of society, social tendencies and political experiences and biographies. At the same time it is a major cross-class party in the East and, with over 5,000 elected officials, it is anchored in parliaments with electoral results constantly surpassing 20 % and is a 4–8 % party in the West. In the East it is above all a force that shapes reality and in the West above all a force of protest. All this is currently connected to inner-party struggles around the sovereignty of interpretation and the programmatic-strategic orientation of the party.

9. DIE LINKE itself is for a middle-bottom alliance. 11.5 % of LINKE members are part of the lower strata, 37 % are part of the lower middle stratum, 43.6 % are of the central middle stratum, while 7.5 % belong to the upper middle stratum. However, the party has not managed to connect together outside itself the milieus represented within it. Thus it still cannot completely benefit from its electoral potential. Every fourth unemployed votes DIE LINKE, but only 11 % of workers vote LINKE and only 4 % of employees. Despite its municipal-political presence, it is weakly anchored socially on the national level. This has got first to grow in the West and be renewed in the East.

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