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Talking About Power: Crisis of Germany's Left

An interview with Ingar Solty

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For all its economic might, Germany's main centrist parties are in crisis. If barely a decade ago the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD) conquered over three-quarters of the vote, in polling today they represent under half of the electorate. But as the main parties lose their hold over Germans, the Left does not seem well-placed to take advantage. The Die Linke party formed by postcommunists and a split from the SPD in 2007 has secured a respectable vote nationally and at the regional level, becoming the country's fourth-largest political force, and yet has consistently failed to rise above 10 per cent of the vote. Indeed, the real upstarts in German politics today are the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, the first such party to reach parliament since 1952) and the liberal-ecologist Green Party.

Seeking to break out of this strategic impasse, some leading figures in Die Linke have created a new populist movement designed to reinsert the language of class and poverty into German politics and split the AfD's own base. However, this remains controversial within Die Linke, with figures loyal to party co-chair Katja Kipping accusing Aufstehen's frontwoman Sahra Wagenknecht of kowtowing to anti-immigration sentiment.

In this interview originally conducted for *Novosti*, Jerko Bakotin spoke with researcher Ingar Solty about the decline of social democracy, Die Linke's strategic dilemma, and the possibility of building a counter-hegemonic force able to challenge for power.

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Jerko Bakotin (JB): The German Social Democrats (SPD) are at a historic low. The Greens are on the rise, but critics claim that this is now a solidly pro-business party. And to their left, Die Linke is unable to break into double digits in the polls. If there has often been talk of a future "red-red-green" government uniting all three parties, this is today arithmetically impossible. So how would you describe the Left's perspectives today?

Ingar Solty (IS): Ever since the creation of Die Linke [in 2007, uniting the postcommunist Party of Democratic Socialism with a split from the SPD] the spoken or unspoken aim of the German left was to create an anti-neoliberal reform government together with the Greens and SPD. If for these other parties forming a government is itself the end goal, for Die Linke this would be what Rosa Luxemburgcalled a transitional goal of revolutionary realpolitik. That is, a move that improved conditions in the fight for a postcapitalist society. Such a coalition would of course require that the SPD broke with its Third Way, market-oriented neoliberal policies; the Greens, similarly, would have to turn away from market-based pseudo-"solutions" to the ecological crisis like carbon emission trading, and indeed their complete surrender to the car industry in the state of Baden-Württemberg, where they are the dominant political force.

Today "red-red-green" is impossible – for political reasons and, with the erosion of social democracy and the rise of the far right, even arithmetically. The SPD is incapable of renewing itself. Its leaders simply cannot turn around and say "Look, everything we ourselves did since at least 2002 was a total mistake and we will have to undo everything that we have done ever since."

Yet while they cannot say this, doing so – and following up on it with concrete policies significantly improving workers' lives – is a necessary step toward regaining some credibility.

JB: What chance is there for a radical shift within the SPD, like in the cases of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party or indeed Bernie Sanders's 2016 primary campaign?

IS: There are no such leaders on the horizon – and there will not be a Sanders or Corbyn within the SPD. This first owes to Germany's different political economy. In the U.S. and UK we see deindustrialization, the decline of labour unions, and tuition fees being offloaded onto workers, whereas Germany still does have a strong industrial base with relatively strong labour unions. Taken together with the existence of a vocational training system for manual labourers and the fact that higher education for intellectual workers is tuition-free, these factors still guarantee "middle class" status for a significant share of the professional working class. This major difference makes the U.S. and Great Britain politically more comparable to Spain, Italy, even Greece and Portugal, in the sense that while in all those countries, the erosion of the working "middle" classes is already a fact; in Germany it is merely feared.

"Immiseration facilitates left-wing responses, whereas the fear of immiseration produces conditions for right-wing ones."

It seems that real immiseration facilitates left-wing responses, whereas the fear of immiseration produces conditions for right-wing ones. And that's why, so far, the richer, more industrialized northern European countries have seen the far right benefitting more from the global financial and eurozone crisis than the Left, while the opposite is true in the European Union's (southern) periphery, in Britain and, at least potentially, in the U.S., where Sanders would probably have won against Trump, had it not been for the Democratic Party establishment's machinations, and in Britain where we're close to a Corbyn government. (Italy could be a counterargument to this thesis, but the Five Star Movement predominantly received its votes with left-wing demands and from former left-wing voters.)

The second reason why there is not going to be a Sanders or Corbyn type in the SPD is that it has been in government for sixteen of the last twenty years. Germany has proportional representation instead of a U.S.- or UK-style first-past-the-post electoral system, and this has allowed smaller, more consistently left-wing parties like Die Linke to establish themselves electorally. For sure, there are still some really well-meaning social-democratic leftists inside the union movement and even the SPD's formally independent Friedrich Ebert Foundation and such like, but all the Corbyn and Sanders-types were already shed to Die Linke years ago.

There are no left-wing backbenchers in the SPD like Corbyn in Britain, who voted against pretty much everything New Labour did, in domestic as well as foreign policy. If some did remain, they left recently, like Marco Bülow, who described himself as completely isolated among SPD parliamentarians, or the young party intellectual Nils Heisterhagen who was ousted from his position after he had demanded a stronger class-based political orientation in his book *The Liberal Illusion*. And of course, what kind of sane anti-neoliberal and peace-oriented leftist would have joined or stuck with a hawkish neoliberal and imperialist SPD even over the last twenty years?

All the new cadres the SPD has attracted over that period have an utterly technocratic understanding of politics. While the ongoing class war from above demands massive social mobilizations from below, akin to the yellow vest protests in France or the kind of movements that Bernie Sanders is promoting, these SPD leaders do not know any form of politics other than working pragmatically within institutions that have long turned against the interests of their party's former working-class base. They do not know how to do anything except governing under and with the powers-that-be. There is no reason to take cheer from this; the erosion of social democracy is a tragedy, because it is largely the far right and not the Left filling the vacuum.

JB: What about the rise of the Greens?

IS: They are almost homogeneously a liberal, upper-middle-class party. They have been a neoliberal force at least since the Agenda 2010 and Hartz labour reforms they implemented in government, and indeed on an imperial path since their active role in the 1999 war in Kosovo (Germany's first military intervention abroad since World War II). The exodus of eco-socialists in the mid-1980s partly paved the way for this, but the party still had a notable left wing. However, this year, the Greens finally broke with their tradition of having one leader from the left wing, and one from the so-called *realo*, pragmatic wing. Now it is under the leadership of two young and charismatic right-wingers.

This has allowed the Greens fully to shift toward rallying a homogenously urban, cosmopolitan, i.e., pro-globalization and pro-EU electorate, made up of high earners or the

young and “aspirant.” The Greens’ tremendous rise in the polls has to do with the fact that they are lucky to have this socially homogenous base. While the SPD and Die Linke have to find ways to win back working-class voters from the far right, the Greens can afford a liberal condescension toward rural and suburban far-right voters, calling them “racist,” “sexist,” “dumb hillbillies,” “deplorables“ etc. This even helps cohere the Greens’ base, because it thus appears the most consistently “antifascist” and humane force, even if its economic and education policy, the gentrification caused by its milieu, and such like, are kicking away the ladders for the “un-PC” working class toward whom they feel so superior. And in that respect, it is also no wonder that the Greens are today oriented toward a coalition with the CDU which Merkel, for opportunist reasons, modernized at least in terms of social policy (same-sex marriage) and ecological policy (a business-friendly exodus from nuclear energy).

JB: What alternative can Die Linke build, if these parties are both so thoroughly neoliberal?

IS: Die Linke remains in the ghetto of under 10 per cent in the polls. It cannot, however, and must not stay there. Neoliberalism’s destruction of society is accelerating and is nurturing the rise of the far right. Die Linke must, then, itself pose the question of power, must call for a “revolution for democracy and social justice,” as the co-chairs Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping called it last year. The Left must loudly voice its desire to rule in order to be able to credibly promise that voting for it and organizing in it is, more than just a symbolic protest, the path to actually changing the material living conditions for the working-class majority in Germany (male or female, German-born or migrant) and tackling the climate crisis through radical strategies including, as a minimum, a socially just industrial transition .

The question is how to effect change. In an interregnum like today’s, right-wing populists say: “The traditional establishment politicians are no longer credible, vote for us and everything will change” or, in a world of growing insecurities, “Everything can stay the same.” For its part, faced with the organized power of the capitalist class and its hegemony, the Left is aware that it has to build popular power and counter-hegemony from below in order to improve things or at least fend off the class struggle from above. Voting alone is not going to change things.

The strategy put forward by party co-chair Bernd Riexinger as well as party headquarters seeks transformative organizing as the key to building that kind of popular counterpower. Yet today the party’s class base is not industrial workers, but what Nicos Poulantzas called the new petty bourgeoisie – professionals, public sector, and white-collar workers. In other words, Die Linke’s members and activists have little to no organic connection to what Gramsci called “the productive bloc in society.” The Left therefore needs to start talking about how to create working-class cadres and party leaders from those sectors of the economy where surplus value is not only being redistributed and maintained, such as in healthcare, education etc., but also from those sectors where it is actually being extracted.

The lack of this has a significant impact on Die Linke’s strategy. The overrepresentation of academics leads to an approach that sees people purely on abstract ideological and moral grounds rather than in terms of their concrete socioeconomic interests. The idea is to rally as many people as possible for important causes like environmentalism, antifascism, or movements defending refugees. In other words, the goal is to mobilize people who are already politically aware and who can devote time to activism outside their workplaces and day-to-day interactions.

This can work extremely well, when, for instance, a quarter of a million people turn out to protest against TTIP and CETA, or the same amount of people turn out to the massive #unteilbar protest against the far right. However, these "new petty bourgeois" leftists, who arrived in the Left through intellectual and academic understanding – as I myself and so many of us did – often fail to not realize sufficiently is that it is much, much easier and less vanguardist to mobilize people based on their everyday material experiences and interests rather than political ideology and morality.

The dominant ideology of Die Linke's activist base, many of whom are drawn to it as students in urban areas – and they are drawn to it increasingly out of an antifascist fear of Trump and the AfD – is a kind of movementism. Their diffuse notion of social change, which party co-chair Katja Kipping also more or less represents, holds that powerful street movements – like last year's anti-G20 Summit protests, #unteilbar, the environmentalist "Ende Gelände" and Hambach Forest protests, the pro-refugee "Seebrücke" rallies, etc. – in combination with social media campaigns, like the anti-sexist #metoo, the anti-racist #metwo, and the anti-classist #unten will somehow magically lead to social-ecological transformation and democratic socialism.

All of these movements and campaigns are crucially important and absolutely key to constructing counterpower, but without strongholds in workplaces, the power of street protests will remain somewhat hollow, or at least less transformative as they could be if they were linked to class power directly emanating from the antagonism of labour and capital.

To take the example of our feminist struggles: If we seek more than just quotas on the number of women in boardrooms or more gender-sensitive language in public documents, if we want to impose on capital a complete socialization of reproductive work with free daycare, free elderly care etc., in a well-paid social-reproduction sector, we need to be able to attack capital where it hurts so that we can actually enforce such redistributive measures upon it. The same thing could be said about the huge gap between our eco-socialist, post-growth aspirations and the limited ecological advances we have made: this owes to the fact that the environmentalist movement began wielding political power in a situation where labour unions were in decline. In other words, because we lacked the class power which could have enforced a public Green New Deal against the interests of the capitalist class.

JB: What are Die Linke's roots in workplace movements?

IS: The good thing is that Die Linke's leadership increasingly understands that the Left needs to be present in class struggles and the union movement, which is the only thing that can even hypothetically allow for any fundamental anti-neoliberal shift. In the Institute for Critical Social Analysis we are calling for a "new," ecological, anti-racist, and feminist class politics; Riexinger's new book is also devoted to "new class politics." However, in all honesty one must acknowledge that this strategy is going to take at least fifteen to twenty years. The party has been successful in becoming organically linked to the healthcare sector and the sphere of social reproduction, and the growing number of strikes and increasing industrial militancy there – from daycare to the hospitals like the Charité hospital in Berlin – are, without a doubt, an expression of Die Linke influence. The same is also true of the Ryanair strike.

But in the core industrial sector Die Linke is still very weak. It is not far-fetched to say the tiny German Communist Party (DKP) and the Maoist Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany

(MLPD), which are very sensitive to these issues, have more workplace presence than Die Linke, because Die Linke has none. Or rather, the party does not have its own workplace groups, only certain very active trade unionists who happen to be Die Linke members as well. Of course, the sphere of production is not the only essential battleground. In the sphere of distribution, absolutely key is the fight in the housing sector. Germany is a country of renters. Both unskilled and skilled, lower and "middle class" workers are heavily affected as global wealth and surplus capital shift into housing. In a society with strong centrifugal tendencies like Germany, the housing question could actually create a "coalition of the middle and bottom," which is a precondition to challenging neoliberalism. Still, while the housing campaign, which Die Linke launched in 2018, is very important, it is only just getting going.

So, it may take fifteen or twenty years until Die Linke is actually what Mimmo Porcaro calls a "connective party" – one that wields real social (counter)power from within workplaces – and is the force behind a real challenge to the power of the German and global 0.1 per cent.

The million-dollar question is: do we actually have that much time? If social democracy continues to wither and the far right keeps rising, what backbone will remain for any kind of material progress, universal emancipation, and the fight against climate change? What will remain of the power the labour unions and a now-weakening collective bargaining system still have, by the time Die Linke is strong enough to offer real leadership? What will the far right do if the Left is not there to provide its own tangible alternatives to neoliberalism? We should remember Poulantzas's warning: it is not the strength of the Left that strengthens the far right, but its weakness. Fascism historically took power when the situation for workers and the fears of social de-classing became so dire that the Left had to seize power and change society but was too weak to do so.

JB: Die Linke's Sahra Wagenknecht and Oskar Lafontaine have launched the "Aufstehen" movement with the help of theater director Bernd Stegemann and others. One of Wagenknecht's goals is to reach out to the people who voted for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). However, many accuse her of making too many concessions on the issue of immigration. Is this what explains her divisions with Die Linke co-chairs Kipping and Riexinger?

IS: I think the overall strategic dilemma – the question of power and how to gain it – is at the heart of the internal divisions. Yes, migration policy is something of a dividing line, and has also become one because of the vitriolic rhetoric that leftists on both sides have been hurling at each other, calling each other "neoliberals" (as some more unhinged Wagenknecht supporters sometimes call Kipping) or "AfD light" (as some of Wagenknecht's more unhinged opponents sometimes call her). Yet, in my view, this dispute merely symptomizes differences in strategic approaches to power and the question of how to deal with working-class voters flocking to the far right. This ought to be debated openly, without self-righteousness, mutual suspicion, and destructive name-calling.

Wagenknecht is well-aware that there are voters with a coherent racist and misogynist mindset whom the Left will never reach, but also that many workers who voted for the AfD are not right-wingers but supported the party because of their insecurities and loss of status, subjective devaluations. She is, rightly, posing the question of how the Left can win them back by driving a wedge between the hard-right and, in many ways, neofascist AfD leadership and its loosely associated base. She wants to do this by showing workers that the AfD does not represent their economic interests, but those of capital, and especially

domestically oriented small and medium-sized businesses which are the worst on labour rights.

As a prominent and highly popular media figure, Wagenknecht is also very sensitive to the new phenomenon of how what Klaus Dörre called "de-mobilized class societies," i.e., societies in which workers experience class society's impacts without being organized and recognizing themselves as a class, erode faith in parties and the political system and create a growing desire for charismatic leaders.

For instance, in the 2017 French elections the traditional big parties were effectively absent. Emmanuel Macron just created a movement for himself. Meanwhile in Austria, Sebastian Kurz turned the long-standing conservative party into his personal electoral machine. Similarly, Donald Trump governs through his 54 million Twitter followers, outside the Republican establishment. And in Germany, half of the voters for the liberal Free Democratic Party would not have voted for it, were it not for their popular leader Christian Lindner.

As the left has long known, these Caesarist desires are very dangerous. As the lyrics of the *Internationale* put it, "no savior from on high delivers, no faith have we in prince or peer"; rather, it must be "our own right hand" that makes "the chains of hatred, greed, and fear shiver." So, this climate of Caesarism is dangerous, and also very real. In this new and volatile historic situation, we will be forced to experiment, and must be ready – as Bertolt Brecht once put it – "to prepare for our next mistake." And this includes questioning the role that popular tribunes can play in left politics, perhaps helping and not hindering the popular mobilization from below. Without this, left populism will indeed end up in the top-down social-democratic statism embodied by Chantal Mouffe. However, in Germany's "demobilized class-society," Wagenknecht is, even if some in the party may regret this, for many this particular tribune, the only visible left and economically populist critic of the status quo.

However, being sensitive to the problem and posing correct questions does not mean that one is also giving the right answers. As I said, the difference between Aufstehen and Die Linke's party leadership is *also* about migration, but it is, in essence, a strategic divide.

Wagenknecht's theoretical orientation is, ultimately, a state-monopoly capitalism approach. She wants to create a big-tent political coalition, a united popular movement against the big banks, the big transnational corporations, and the big insurance companies. And Wagenknecht is extremely talented in not only stirring working-class hatred against class injustices, but actually convincing her meritocratic petty bourgeois audience – which pays to see her speak because they know her from the telly and are often in awe of her eloquent intelligence – that as hard-working doctors, lawyers, and professors, and so on they will still not ever join the top 1 per cent, let alone 0.1 per cent. She convincingly makes the case that it is not hard work, but inherited wealth invested as capital that makes people rich. Thus, she can convincingly lay out to these voters the need to confront the question of private property in the means of production and capitalist monopolies.

Still, in her last two books, Wagenknecht actually praises productive and innovative small-business capital and juxtaposes it to unproductive, innovation-blocking monopoly capital. This is to a certain degree borne of conviction, a belief in a left-wing kind of ordo-liberalism with strong regulation and various forms of socialization and common ownership. But is also tactical, seeking to create a wide coalition against monopoly capitalism. This is problematic because not only does she end up stabbing attempts to unionize super-exploitative small

businesses in the back and creating illusions concerning capitalist markets and the origins of innovation – I wish she would read Robert Cox or Mariana Mazzucato on these issues – but also because she pits struggles against exploitation and struggles against oppression against one another.

Her big coalition strategy risks becoming a short-sighted tactic. Too often it leads to an impulse of staying silent on issues of racism, because addressing them might split the unity of the class. And thus, Wagenknecht's valuable general emphasis on class struggle and economic populism drifts toward a reductionism unable to deal with less strictly economic issues.

Unfortunately, the more Wagenknecht is attacked by liberals and the outer shores of the Left – in an often self-righteously sectarian way – this appears to reinforce her and her followers' gut feeling that left-wing emancipation struggles, (liberal) feminism, (liberal) anti-racism etc., are an opposing or even "neoliberal" agenda. And among her followers, one can now find the same kind of stubbornness and resentful self-righteousness. We can imagine a split in Die Linke would simply reinforce these kinds of stupidities on both extremes. It, therefore, must be prevented by any means necessary, especially with a more solidaristic dialogue among the Left, less self-righteousness, and more self-doubt.

JB: What actually is Aufstehen's wider strategy?

IS: It wants to mobilize the Green Party and SPD bases against their own leaderships, to push those parties further to the left. This acknowledges two things: first, that the nation-state is strategically important, because it is where the working class has its strongest organizations and is best equipped to enforce change. And that there exist popular majorities for rebuilding the welfare state and a peaceful foreign policy. These majorities stem from the experience of the "moral economy" of 1970s welfare capitalism in the West as well as the tremendous economic securities and also feminist workplace emancipation provided by state socialism in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

Secondly, this approach recognizes that Die Linke has to break out of the sub-10 per cent ghetto but cannot do so by hoping for renewal in the SPD, a leftward shift in the Greens or backroom talks with these parties' leaders. Nor can it rely on up-and-coming figures like SPD youth organization leader Kevin Kühnert, who ran the campaign against a new grand coalition with the CDU. Wagenknecht's idea is: if movements and class struggles from below are too weak, as they currently are and look likely to remain in the short term, then Aufstehen's approach has to be to help those struggles from below by mobilizing them from above, using her personal media popularity.

This is, of course, a very difficult and some might say impossible thing to do. If 140,000 people signed up to Aufstehen online with a click, they just as easily also un-sign. Some of Aufstehen's events have not been very dynamic. And the fact that Wagenknecht and Stegemann often juxtapose class politics to so-called "identity" politics itself creates divisions rather than uniting the Left. And while we all want to replicate the drive of the Sanders movement, Momentum, or La France Insoumise, this tactical approach is also not comparable to what Sanders, Corbyn, or Melenchon are doing. They never pit class struggle and anti-racism against one another. Rather, they challenge racism whilst simultaneously creating universalist policies that, like the $15 minimum wage, help all workers at the same time as having a strongly anti-racist and feminist bent: that is, they most directly benefit African Americans, Latinos, and women who disproportionately belong to the low-wage

sector of the working class.

In the end, the tactic of being silent about racism or denouncing "identity politics" is counterproductive, because it splits the Left while strengthening the AfD's own culture-wars message and demonization of particularist gender-identity politics. AfD sympathizers will say: Wagenknecht's rhetorical "realism" with regard to migration or her critique of identity politics are great, but she's in the wrong party and in a minority there, while these kinds of convictions are dominant in the AfD. And finally, the verticalist way in which Wagenknecht launched Aufstehen from above, without consulting either the party leadership or the rank and file, was bound to create major – and justified – criticism of what many perceived as antidemocratic maneuverings. This has even led to attempts to unseat her as co-leader of Die Linke's Bundestag faction.

So, for all of these reasons, I am skeptical that Aufstehen will succeed. But those on the Left who will it to fail seem unable to recognize that this weakens not just it but the Left in general. The biggest and strongest enemy is not inside Die Linke, and is not Wagenknecht, but the neoliberal, imperialist ruling class and the far right. On the continuum stretching from the maximalist position of "open borders," (mentioned in passing in the party program), to Wagenknecht's position of robust asylum rights and Kipping's interest in a new immigration law, there is enough space for compromise as there is on any other issue.

In early December there was good news, in this sense: a special meeting of the party's "Gang of Four," namely Bundestag faction co-chairs Wagenknecht and Dietmar Bartsch plus party leaders Riexinger and Kipping, gave exactly that message of unity. There are differences on the issue of migration, for sure, but it is not like they cannot be overcome. The idea of a new political cleavage separating cosmopolitans from communitarians, as suggested by Aufstehen supporter and Frankfurt University political science professor Andreas Noelke, is illusory. If a split along those lines does happen nonetheless, it will be a self-inflicted wound.

Class politics and liberation struggles cannot be separated from one another: if you do that, you either receive class reductionism without emancipation or a "progressive neoliberalism" that only raises up some privileged individuals while creating new injustices along the way. Rather, liberation has to become real and material for everyone. To counterpose class politics and emancipation can only close us off in identitarian trenches, unable to speak to each other. That will destroy our capacity to unite masses of people behind a vision of taking and using power.

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