

Germany: Tragedy and farce in Thuringia

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"Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."

With these words Marx begins the treatise "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte". While we do not want to exaggerate the historical significance of the recent farce in the Thuringian state parliament, when Thomas Kemmerich of the Liberal Party, FDP, was elected Prime Minister because the Christian Democratic Union, CDU, of Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, joined forces with the right wing Alternative for Germany, AfD, there is, indeed, a powerful historical precedent. Moreover, we have to raise the question how to prevent the farce from being followed by a new tragedy.

At the beginning of 1930, it was precisely in Thuringia that the NSDAP, the Nazi party, entered a state government for the first time in the Weimar Republic. That government, of the German People's Party, the German National People's Party, the Thuringian Land Federation, the Reich Party of the German middle class and the Nazis, marked an important step towards the recognition of fascism as a possible coalition partner of "moderate" bourgeois parties and a political force that could advance the interests of German imperialism.

Like all historical analogies, there are of course important differences between 1930 and 2020: The AfD is not a fascist party, even if more and more right-wing extremists are joining it - especially in its Thüringian branch. This is one of the most right wing sections of the AfD, led by Björn Höcke, who became infamous for branding the Holocaust memorial a "memorial of shame".

It is not only these right-populist and antisemitic remarks that show parallels with the Weimar Republic. The bourgeois parties of that time also thought they were "using" the NSDAP, often seeing Hitler and his followers as useful, uncultured, idiots.

Initial response

The election of Kemmerich was the first time that a whole regional branch of the CDU and the FDP openly collaborated to prevent the candidate of the Left Party, Bodo Ramelow, the previous prime minister, backed by the SPD and Greens, from being elected by the parliament in Thuringia.

Initially, the "Liberal" FDP in particular praised the move by its regional branch. Its national chairman, Christian Lindner, congratulated it and his vice-chairman, Wolfgang Kubicki, even hailed this "victory of the centre". The Federal Government Commissioner for Eastern Germany, and Thuringian CDU vice-chairman, Christian Hirte congratulated Kemmerich on his election.

Only when public outrage, up to and including open condemnation of the Thuringian manoeuvre by the CDU/CSU federal leadership and several FDP board members, began to mount, did the state

organisations of the CDU and FDP initiate a partial withdrawal.

If they had previously accepted the electoral support of the AfD for the "success of the Centre" and played it down as a favourable coincidence, they now claimed they had been deceived by the right. Meanwhile, FDP leader Lindner even presented the FDP as a victim of a particularly perfidious tactic of the AfD, because it did not vote for its own candidate in the decisive round, but for the FDP.

In reality, the cooperation between CDU, FDP and AfD is nothing new in Thuringia. The ousting of "red Bodo" has been the goal that united the 3 factions for years. Already, in 2014, they demonstrated together against a "socialist" prime minister. Some even conjured up the return of the old ruling party of East Germany? the SED. At that time, the CDU, FDP, AfD chanted "Ramelow get out!" in close harmony with neo-fascist circles, accompanied by a torchlight procession in front of the Erfurt State Chancellery.

Höcke announced that the AfD would be prepared to elect a CDU or FDP candidate immediately after the state elections in 2019, which had resulted in a hung parliament where neither CDU/FPD nor the Left Party/SPD/Greens could gain a parliamentary majority. Out of the 90 deputies in the Thuringian parliament, the Left Party gained 29, the AfD 22, CDU 21, SPD 8, Greens 5 and FDP 5.

In order to prevent Ramelow being elected as prime minister by a relative majority, informal talks between representatives of CDU, FDP and AfD had been taking place since November. The "surprise coup" was therefore not so surprising - especially since the Thuringian CDU had been made aware of the possible AfD tactics even before the vote in parliament, but obviously decided to ignore the warning.

The Farce

The right-wing manoeuvre took on the traits of a farce, not only because of the silly excuses and lies, but also because the FDP and CDU got cold feet. Due to public pressure and dramatic losses in the polls, the retreat was signalled, albeit with a lot of shady moves. On the one hand, they could no longer hold on to the office of Prime Minister but, on the other, they did not want new elections, not least because opinion polls estimate that the Left Party would win up to 39 percent and a coalition with SPD and Greens would probably get a parliamentary majority. By contrast, the CDU dropped to 12 percent in the polls and the FDP would probably not make it into parliament at all. Even the AfD would only marginally increase its vote. However, the "traditional" parties of the German bourgeoisie in Thuringia still want to block the election of Ramelow as Prime Minister and a minority government led by him.

Under pressure, Kemmerich first announced, 25 hours after his election, that he would resign from office, but left open quite when. After several zig-zags, he finally resigned on February 8. However, in accordance with the state constitution, he will remain acting Prime Minister until a successor is elected by the state parliament. Even without an elected government, he could still continue to be a nuisance until new parliamentary elections are held and a government majority is formed.

The historical analogy

In Germany, historical comparisons play a special role in public discussion. Bodo Ramelow was one of the first to bring these into play when he pointed out the parallel with the NSDAP's participation in the Thuringian state government in 1930.

The parties who blocked with the AfD, now present themselves as outraged, as do the editorial commentaries in the bourgeois press. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, FAZ, one of the leading bourgeois papers, for example, was quick to point out the differences in the situation and that the AfD is not a fascist party. The difference in the character of the two parties undoubtedly exists, and certainly left-

wingers should also beware of equating an aggressive, racist and ethnic right-wing populist party with a fascist one. The references to the fact that this is not the first time that the bourgeois centre has allowed itself to be elected by a right-wing party to the head of a federal state are certainly also correct. Thus, the Hamburg CDU under Ole von Beust, mayor from 2001-2003, formed a coalition with the "Partei Rechtsstaatlicher Offensive" around a right winger called Schill.

But these differences must not obscure the essence of the historical parallel. When Hegel and, following him, Marx, speak of history repeating itself, this must not be misunderstood as a duplication of all political factors and alliances, it must not be forgotten that every such repetition always has its differences.

What is decisive for Hegel is that the historical significance of certain events becomes apparent in this. For example, in the lectures on the philosophy of history, he said: "Through repetition, what at the beginning seemed only coincidental and possible becomes real and confirmed". At the core of this is not that all the actors have the same "character", if this were the case, they could never appear as the tragedy or farce to which Marx refers, but that underlying, deeper social contradictions are expressed in both events.

The parallel between the political situation of 1930 and that of 2020 is that the tendencies towards a crisis of capitalism are growing. The struggle for the re-division of the world on the side of the ruling class is creating a crisis of the traditional political system, which is driving growing sections of capital, like ever larger bourgeois and petty-bourgeois strata, to the conviction that alliances with right-wing forces, which have so far been denied access to government, are becoming necessary. Here, for all the differences between AfD and NSDAP, lies the historical parallel and also the new, threateningly reactionary quality of the events in Thuringia.

The fact that this process has progressed much further in other countries such as Austria or Italy only makes it clear that this is not just a local episode but a general reactionary tendency of our time.

Crisis of the CDU - the resignation of Kramp-Karrenbauer

Ultimately, the significance of the situation lies not in how the government crisis in Thuringia is overcome, but in its national implications. The half-broken manoeuvre has prolonged, even deepened, the crisis of the FDP and CDU. The announcement of Angela Merkel's resignation as CDU chairwoman in summer 2020 and her announcement that she would not stand for Chancellor again, represents the high point of the development so far.

The struggle among the conservatives was never entirely quelled under her leadership, but it is now breaking out openly. The Thuringian CDU has not only shown itself deaf to warnings from Merkel and her successor as party chair, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, about the AfD, it was also not prepared to follow the party leaders' demands for new elections. Their deliberate obstruction illustrates the deep cracks within the bourgeois camp. Whilst the formation of a CDU-FDP minority government tolerated by the AfD has had to be called off for the time being, not least because of pressure from the national party, many in the CDU in Thuringia will be pleased that the unloved and politically powerless Kramp-Karrenbauer has now resigned as the party's chairwoman.

Many in the CDU state associations in East Germany and in the national-conservative "Union of Values" openly supported and still support the tactics of the CDU's state leader in Thuringia, Mike Mohring. This wing of the Union wants a coalition with the FDP after the next election and does not want to rule out a pact with the AfD to get it. In any event, they prefer this to a coalition with the Greens, the SPD, or both. Members of the "young group" in the national parliament, the Bundestag, a CDU faction mostly supporting the neo-liberal hardliner Friedrich Merz to be the new CDU chairman, as well as numerous members of

parliament, officials and members of all the East German state associations, are moving in a similar direction.

Faced with the deep crisis of the EU, the threat of economic collapse and intensified international competition, collaboration between CDU/CSU, FPD and AfD is increasingly seen as an option for parts of the capitalist class, since all these developments require a substantially harder, nationalist approach.

The effective dismissal of Kramp-Karrenbauer by the Erfurt state parliament faction is only one step in this process. What the right wing of the CDU/CSU wants is made clear, among others, by the former president of the Verfassungsschutz, the interior secret service, Hans-Georg Maaßen. For him, the possible future government of the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens, the Red-Red-Green coalition, as it is called, would be a socialist government and that is what he intends to prevent. With headlines such as "The main thing is the socialists are gone?" he not only continues to score points with the right-wing public, but the AfD has also already brought him into discussion as a possible Chancellor. An interview with the Berlin daily Tagesspiegel, made clear his viewpoint:

"He hopes, said Maaßen, that the CDU in Thuringia understands that it must listen more to its voters. Ten percent turned away in the last state election. Many went to AfD, others stayed at home. Now it is time to win back the voters. For example, with a different migration policy, in which immigrants who are supposed to leave are actually deported."

Clearly, such views will not simply be adopted by everyone in the CDU. The party is rather split between one wing that wants to move the Conservatives to the right and one that wants a coalition with the Green Party after the next election. The Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein, Daniel Günther, a representative of this wing, demand that Kemmerich, Maaßen and the Union of Values should be expelled from the CDU. Whilst this clearly will not happen it does show that the unity of the CDU, which was only established after the Second World war, is itself under threat and increasingly untenable. The rise of the AfD and of the Green Party are both expressions of this fragmentation and re-formation in the bourgeois camp.

Strategic problems of German Imperialism

The CDU, the traditional "Atlanticist" bourgeois party is deeply caught up in the conflict, because previous strategies for the European Union, EU, have been exhausted and there is no agreed strategic reorientation. The aggressive new course of US imperialism under Trump poses a major challenge for the EU and especially for Germany, its leading power, and this is further exacerbated by Brexit and the rise of China. In the Mediterranean region, in the Near and Middle East, in Africa, the EU can only score economically. Geo-strategically it and, thus, German imperialism, are falling further and further behind.

The dispute in the CDU/CSU is about the way in which German imperialism should resolve this problem. Should it go for a "black-green", that is, CDU-Green, option with more EU-deepening and "ecological" austerity measures to enforce its own claims? Or does that require a CDU-FDP- AfD/Fascist government, proudly declaring Germany First! on its banners, the black-yellow-blue/brown variant?

The ideological-strategic conflict within the German bourgeoisie will be aggravated by an economic crisis in the coming period. That will mean a tougher class policy approach at home. For the exploited and oppressed, this will also mean preparing for new attacks on the social services, on jobs and wages. The various wings of the bourgeoisie will all propose, and enforce, massive attacks, albeit with different ideological masks. Thus, the aggressive nationalist parts will combine attacks on the working class with ethnic and racist demagoguery, while the "liberal", cosmopolitan part will combine attacks with some promises of reform for "social cushioning".

The parties of the Grand Coalition want new elections

In this situation, the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party and also the "liberal" wing of the CDU/CSU are outraged at the taboo on collaboration with the AfD being broken. They demand new elections to restore the credibility of "politics". This alone is basically a fraud. After all, it is not politics as such, but rather the CDU and FDP who have made pacts with the AfD.

The tactics of Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel, and the CDU executive aim at two things. On the one hand, they present themselves as democrats and pretend to be "hard" opponents of the Thuringian state party. Nevertheless, they do not want to break with it. On the other hand, they appeal to the "unity of the democrats", that is, that the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party should continue to cooperate with the CDU/CSU (and the FDP).

The CDU/CSU and FDP even demand from the Left Party, that it should accommodate Kemmerich's supporters, preferably by dropping Ramelow as a candidate. Instead, they, the Greens and the SPD should support a "public figure" recognised by all democrats, in other words, they should renounce forming own government.

So far, at least, this farcical proposal has been rejected. Indeed, the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party and their youth organisations, as well as the trade unions, have brought thousands of people onto the streets against Kemmerich's election in recent days. On February 15, almost 20,000 joined the demonstration against AfD, CDU and FDP in front of the Erfurt state parliament.

However, the SPD does not want to break with the collaborators. It rejects the idea of ending the Grand Coalition now. Kühnert, the leader of the SPD youth and vice-chairman of the party, explained why; it would only strengthen the right, because a break with the CDU/CSU would make it more difficult to restore the "unity of the democrats" and commit the CDU to non-alliance with the AfD.

The main German trade union federation, the DGB, follows the same line. Like the SPD it calls for demonstrations and indeed, the rally in Erfurt was packed with trade union members, but it does not want to rally them against the CDU, what it wants is to strengthen Merkel and her wing within the party.

In this situation, the Left Party has also joined the chorus of demands for a "unity of democrats". The CDU and FDP should correct their mistake by clearing the way for Ramelow in the Thuringian state parliament in the next one to two weeks and re-electing him, preferably in the first round of elections.

What lessons can be learned from a historical analogy?

Even if representatives of the Left Party like Ramelow have brought the analogy 1930-2020 into play, their policies make it clear that the party has not understood its actual meaning, its actual significance. In both cases, it was not the "betrayal of democracy" that led to the open bourgeois parties' cooperation with fascism or right-wing populism. Rather, it is the crisis of capitalism, albeit in different forms, that undermined more and more the "normal" democratic forms of bourgeois parliamentarism and the party system connected with them.

After all, every longer-lasting reproduction of bourgeois-democratic relations is based on a certain, historically established, relationship between the classes, which in the parliamentary framework is usually presented as a "consensually" accepted change of government and opposition. Bourgeois democracy is increasingly losing this integrative force, reflecting a much deeper and far from complete change in the relationship between the classes.

After the Second World War, the CDU and SPD became the state-supporting major parties, representing various class forces within the political system and integrating the working class through social partnership and limited reforms. In this way, the SPD and trade unions not only integrated the mass of the working class, they also established and reproduced a social democratic leadership and hegemony. This whole system has been through a series of ruptures and crises since the end of the 1960s, resulting in the undermining of this post-war order. The historic crisis of the SPD and the CDU/CSU is thus an expression of this development.

Left Party

The Left Party's policy is ultimately backward-looking regarding these changes. It wants to fight the right by appealing to the parts of the bourgeoisie, the middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie who hanker after the social and political order established after the second world war. It wants, more or less consciously, to revive the political conditions and the balance of forces of that period, although their material basis has been exhausted.

In this, it is repeating the historical mistake made by social democracy in the Weimar Republic. Against the strengthening forces of reaction, the SPD sought an alliance with the "democratic" bourgeois forces, the counterpart of today's "unity of democrats" and "civil society". Therefore, not only are the "democratic" principles of the CDU invoked, but above all a coalition of the Greens, SPD and the Left Party is brought into play as a new "bulwark" of democracy.

Even a coalition with the Greens would be nothing more than a coalition of reformist, bourgeois workers' parties with a green-liberal party of capital, just another coalition of class collaboration, which would necessarily leave the property relations untouched and defend German imperialist policies. As the experiences of red-red or red-red-green coalitions at the state level have shown time and again, even if some of their constituent parties are socially based on the working class, they are also only one form of bourgeois government, acting at best as somewhat more moderate advocates of capital.

If lessons are really to be drawn from the historical analogy, they must not be limited to criticism of the devastating policies of the Communist Party in the early 1930s, based on the theory of "social fascism", which equated the social democrats with the fascists as defenders of capitalism. Criticism of that theory is certainly justified but, today, is beside the point. Today, such ideas are only held by Stalinist sects that are fundamentally and quite rightly meaningless. The mainstream of the German labour movement and the left is about to repeat the mistakes of the social democracy, not of the Communist Party.

Red-Red-Green?

Today, this could create new illusions in the form of support for a Red-Red-Green coalition, because at first glance it appears to be a response to the shift to the right. In addition, large parts of the progressive social movements are currently characterised by cross-class, leftist petty-bourgeois ideologies, such as the environmental movement or feminism.

The central problem of the strategy of the Left Party, and even more so of the SPD and trade unions, is that in a deep social crisis, alliances between representatives of antagonistic social classes, that is parties of the (liberal or democratic) bourgeoisie with parties/organisations based on the working class, can only be achieved by subordinating the exploited class and the socially oppressed. At first glance, cross-class alliances seem to bring together more forces. However, since those forces pursue opposing goals, they do not add up, in practice they cancel each other out. They necessarily repel precisely those strata of the working class that are most affected by crisis developments - and thus also prepare the ground for the right.

The alternative therefore must not be "unity of democrats", but unity of the working class and the oppressed. This demand must also be addressed to the bourgeois, reformist leaderships of the Left Party, SPD and trade unions, not because revolutionaries believe in their serious will to break with the bourgeoisie or its parties, but because the supporters of these parties must be broken away from their present leaders, because the members of the trade unions must be broken away from the bureaucratic apparatus.

Therefore, we demand from the SPD that it immediately break the Grand Coalition! Therefore, the Left Party should mobilise on the streets and in the workplaces for Ramelow to become Prime Minister in Thuringia and to push through a programme in the interest of the wage earners. The Left Party should take the initiative to push through re-election not through backroom talks with CDU/CSU and FDP members of parliament, but through pressure from the streets and actions up to the point of generalised strike action.

The upcoming collective bargaining disputes in the public service, local transport, electrical and metalworking industries could be used to get the class moving again, above all as the decisive political and social actor, not in second or third row. The same applies to the struggles of the environmental movement, anti-racist and anti-militarist mobilisations. Demonstrations like the 20,000 mobilised in Erfurt on 15 February, or the anti-fascist demonstration in Dresden on the same day, must not be the end of the protest, but the beginning of new, intensified class struggle actions.

The election of Kemmerich was a clear sign of German capitalists' current shift to the right. It illustrates the possibilities they are currently considering. We too must discuss and tackle more far-reaching measures than demos, petitions and referendums. Conferences of action against the shift to the right, against the Grand Coalition, against the next crisis programmes of capital will be necessary if we want to go on the offensive and thus be able to deliver a real blow against the ruling class as a whole.

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