

# The Rise of the AfD and the political crisis in Germany

Martin Suchanek Wed, 02/11/2016 - 08:33

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Until quite recently, German imperialism seemed a bit different from the rest of Europe. In most European countries, right wing populist, racist or even fascist parties had been on the rise and made it into national parliaments, whilst in Germany there seemed to be not much room for a party to the right of the ruling Christian Democrats, the CDU and their Bavarian ally, the Christian Social Union, CSU.

This has clearly changed dramatically now. The 'Alternative für Deutschland', AfD, Alternative for Germany, has become a significant rightwing populist force. Since 2014, it has been able to win parliamentary seats in all the regional elections. It now has a group in 10 out of 16 regional assemblies. The electoral successes were particularly strong in 2016 with 24.2 percent in Sachsen-Anhalt, 12.6 in Rheinland-Pfalz, 15.1 in Baden-Württemberg, 20.8 in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and 14.2 percent in Berlin. In the opinion polls, it is now regularly well above 10 percent nationally.

Originally, the AfD was formed to oppose European 'support' and bail-out for Greece in 2013. Whilst Greece and other southern Europeans were blackmailed by the German finance minister into accepting draconian austerity programmes, the AfD accused the German government of being 'soft' on 'lazy' Southern Europeans. The Euro was branded as the root of the crisis and as a burden for German capitalism, which should be abandoned or, at least, be restricted to a more 'solid' northern European zone.

This was combined with a hard-core neoliberal agenda, inspired by Hans-Olaf Henkel, the former head of the board of German industrialists. Whilst the party failed to make the 5 percent threshold in 2013 in the general elections, it entered the European parliament in 2014 with 7.1 percent and 7 deputies. At that time, it formed a common bloc with the British Tories in the EU-parliament.

## Anti EU

At that time, it was characterised by a combination of conservative, neo-liberal, nationalist and racist politics. Most of the founders of the AfD had been second or third rank functionaries in the CDU or the liberal Free Democratic Party, FDP. The first chairman, Bernd Lucke, was a neo-liberal economist who saw the Euro as a gravedigger of the whole European continent. Whilst he and Henkel saw the AfD as a vehicle to push the conservative CDU in an anti-European direction, it had from the very beginning a wing that was much more oriented towards right wing racist populism, aiming to build a mass base for such a party by overt racist and, in particular, anti-Muslim, demagogy and hate.

When the far right started to mobilise in force against refugees and immigrants, and Pegida emerged in Dresden and other cities, mobilising tens of thousands under slogans mimicking the FN in France, the FPÖ in Austria or Wilders in the Netherlands, the AfD split. Its more 'liberal' and 'respectable' anti-European

wing, around Lucke and Henkel, lost control and left the party. Right wingers like Frauke Petry (chairman of the party), Gauland (an old former CDU-rightwinger) took over. They clearly aimed to turn the AfD into a right wing populist party with a mass electoral following.

So far, they have succeeded. They sharply attacked the opening of German borders in the summer of 2015 and branded refugees as potential suicide bombers, Islamist fanatics or 'at best' lazy people who wanted to rip off the hard working German white 'middle class'.

Like Trump and other right wing politicians, AfD spokespersons used extremely provocative language and then presented themselves as 'victims' of the establishment, the ones who were silenced when they spoke plainly and said what 'everyone' thought. For example, the EU-parliamentarian, Beatrix Von Storch, mused about allowing the border guards to shoot women and children, if they were attacked in a 'raid' by refugees. Whilst the AfD distanced itself somewhat from such scandalous speeches, it did so by attacking the media and the 'naïve' public who 'misrepresented' these racist provocations and tried to silence those who spoke out for the 'ordinary' Germans.

Then, the AfD fell out with the Tories. This was not so much because of the overt racism, but because of support for UKIP in their anti-European stand. The AfD itself reoriented towards the FPÖ, Front National, Fidesz and other right-wing populist or even semi-fascist parties in Europe. Although, in the beginning, Euro-scepticism was the main issue for the party, now it is racism, racism, racism.

The majority of the AfD leadership, and most of its regional parties, are still ultimately oriented towards pushing the CDU/CSU 'back on track' and see the CSU as a kind of ally in this. The AfD itself clearly has an electoral strategy rather than one based on mass mobilisation. However, it also has a wing, for example around the AfD-leader in Thuringia, that is collaborating with racist street mobilisations like Pegida or with open fascist groupings.

Like a number of other right wing parties, the AfD has been able to build itself an electoral base amongst different layers of society. These include not only smaller capitalists and entrepreneurs and the middle strata, but also sections of the white working class.

This requires a certain additional explanation, since the AfD has not dropped its neo-liberal agenda. It openly rejects the minimum wage, it calls for the scrapping of the health insurance system and the privatisation of the whole health sector. In the Berlin regional election, in September 2016, it was the only party campaigning for the privatisation of all public housing.

The "system"

Of course, this combination is not unique in Europe (particularly in Eastern Europe), but it needs to be explained. For the AfD, the reason is 'the system', which includes an 'establishment' of politicians remote from their voters, an idle 'liberal' intelligentsia, which imposes 'values' like gender-mainstreaming, lesbian and gay rights, contempt for the family and 'German culture' on the people, and which privileges refugees and immigrants over the 'hard working' Germans or white 'Europeans', a system in which the trade unions 'prevent' people from working by 'bureaucratic regulations'. Unlike the conservative and social-democratic or Green parties, the AfD presents itself as a blend of conservatism and neo-liberalism, a radical party of change that will put things 'back in order'.

Racism is the ideology which binds all this together and allows it to target an 'external' enemy. It is not capitalism, but refugees, muslims, liberalism, trade unions and the left, who are responsible for growing insecurity, growing competition and the poverty of pensioners and parts of the working population.

However, it would be wrong to see the rise of the AfD simply as evidence of a rise of racism among sections of the middle strata, the petit bourgeoisie and backward workers because of growing insecurity, a response to the effects of a structural crisis of capitalism. The German government itself has introduced a series of overt racist measures in recent years. Merkel's support for the refugees was never meant seriously. Firstly, we must not forget that it was the mass movement of the refugees themselves that broke through the walls of fortress Europe and defied the racist laws which the Merkel government itself had imposed, together with the European Union.

Unlike the Hungarian or, later, the Austrian, government, Merkel and the German governmental coalition wanted a 'European' solution to stop the refugees. They wanted to seal the borders around the EU, rather than re-erect borders between the EU states, because of the negative consequences that would have for an already shaken EU.

In addition, in summer 2015, a significant part of the German population not only did not resent the arrival of the refugees, but positively welcomed them. There are estimates that up to 10 million people were active in distributing humanitarian aid and organising local support groups.

Since then, however, the situation has changed dramatically. The government (and the EU) have introduced a number of laws and treaties with other states, like Turkey, to seal off the European borders, to prevent refugees from entering. In addition, the SPD and CDU/CSU have declared the Balkan states, states in North Africa and even parts of Afghanistan as safe places for refugees, allowing for massive deportations in the coming months.

Furthermore, the German government has scrapped the asylum laws and has introduced a so-called 'integration' law, which is actually designed to prevent integration and to ease the deportation of those who are regarded as 'unwilling'.

By its own racist measures, the German government feeds into the AfD narrative that there are too many refugees, too many migrants, too many muslims in Germany and Europe. At the same time, the AfD's racism has also shifted its focus. Whilst it was the 'flood' of refugees in 2015 and early 2016, the main target for them now is immigrants, muslims in particular, who have not 'integrated' and assimilated German culture.

Like the 'establishment' across Europe, they turn the reality upside down. In reality, it is the European imperialist powers that have actually invaded, occupied and plundered other countries, including all those where millions of muslim people live. In Germany, France and other European countries, migrant workers have been refused equal access to jobs, education and welfare for generations, their real integration into public life and work has been blocked by their being directed into insecure and badly paid jobs.

Here, the AfD presents itself as the most consistent, radical, chauvinist party. Indeed, its demands go too far for large sections of capital and the German government, since they currently need selective migration, whilst the AfD needs to indulge its petit-bourgeois followers with the reactionary dream that an ethnically pure market economy would benefit all.

#### Political crisis

So, whilst racism is key to understanding the AfD's electoral success and its particular brand of right wing populism, its growth also reflects a political crisis in the German bourgeoisie itself.

German imperialism is clearly the dominant economic power of the European Union and the Euro-zone in particular. It has been able to put Southern Europe on rations, but not to unite the European Union as an

imperialist block under its rule and hegemony. That would allow German imperialism and its closer allies to fight on an equal footing with the US or China for the redivision of the world.

The questions beginning to be asked about Merkel's leadership reflect her failure to achieve such a complete domination of Europe. The European Central Bank is not fully under control, but continues with quantitative easing. Germany could not impose its strategy for a 'European solution' to the refugees crisis. It could not prevent the Brexit. The US has forced the EU and Germany into a permanent state of tension with Russia over Ukraine. In Syria and Iraq, the European Union has little to say, little to offer, whilst Russia and the US, and even regional powers, are fighting to re-order the region. Even the belated signing of the CETA agreement with Canada demonstrates the fragility of the EU.

Whilst the German bourgeoisie does not (yet) have an alternative strategy to Merkel's, the rise of the AfD expresses a growing discontent not only with the social situation, but with the government. The fact that Berlin cannot simply impose its policy on others, alongside the permanent crisis of the European Union, leads to a loss of confidence in the government by large sections of the middle strata and middle class, which is expressed in the vote for the AfD. The AfD was not only able to win voters from the CDU, the SPD and even from the Left Party in large numbers, the largest single number of voters were people who had abstained in previous elections.

This is particularly strong in East Germany. The bourgeois media explain this by pointing to the Stalinist past of the former degenerated workers' state. There is certainly an element of truth in that because the GDR had an extremely rigid immigration policy and labour migrants were sealed off completely from the ordinary citizens. But that does not explain why there are also frightening examples of electoral bastions of the AfD in West Germany.

Moreover, there is another factor to explain why the AfD has made big gains in the East. Capitalist class relations were only re-introduced there 25 years ago, all classes have had to struggle to establish a stable existence, the 'middle classes' have not been brought up over decades in a stable, mighty West German imperialist state, where they could gain confidence in the order and stability of 'democracy'. Therefore, the middle classes are also more prone to racist and populist demagoguery and hysteria. Likewise, the numbers of long term unemployed, those in precarious jobs, the 'excluded' sections of the white German working class, are still significantly larger than in the West.

In addition, the trade unions and the social-democratic party, which in the West are based on the labour aristocracy rather than on the working class in general, have weaker links in the class and a shorter tradition in the East. The Left Party, on the other hand, although it has organic roots in society, these are in organisations such as tenants' and pensioners' associations, not so much in the unions and workplaces.

The SPD, as a party of the Grand Coalition, is stuck in governmental politics while the unions try to 'solve' working class concerns in collaboration with the bosses, rather than in struggle. Since the AfD has made inroads among working class voters, the bureaucracy wants to avoid raising anti-racist mobilisations, because this would require raising the issue in the unions and workplaces itself. This cowardice in turn only plays into the hands of the racists. The Left Party, finally, is divided over whether it should present itself as an 'anti-AfD-Party' or make concessions to racism itself, for example, by implementing immigration controls where it is in government.

It is this crisis of working class leadership, and the resulting lack of mobilisation against racism, which opens the door to the AfD and makes it easier for it to make inroads into the working class.

Whilst there are a number of anti-racist initiatives, alliances and demonstrations, there is no united, nationwide campaign. But that is exactly what is needed, a united front of the working class, the unions, the parties, the far left, the refugees and all immigrant organisations that could challenge the rise of the AfD and state racism.

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