

Thuringia after the election: where now for the Left Party?

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Thuringia marked the low point of the recent East German state elections. Although the general tendency was similar to other states; growth of the AfD, confirmation of the party of the prime minister as the strongest force, - the result differed on one essential point. While in the state parliaments of Brandenburg and Saxony the "parties of the centre" (still) have an absolute majority, in Thuringia the CDU, SPD, Greens and FDP together make up less than half of the deputies.

The two parties with the strongest votes and the winners of the elections on 27 October, the Left Party and the AfD, now account for more than half of the parliamentarians. This shocked and worried the bourgeois ?centre?, caught between the two ?extremes?, the Alternative for Germany, AfD, and the Left Party, they could not form a government.

The shock was especially deep for the CDU of Angela Merkel. The fact that SPD and Greens lost is not really surprising and was in line with the polls of recent weeks. Only the Left Party was able to benefit from the "work of the red-red-green state government" and the prime minister, with an increase in both votes and deputies, while its coalition partners lost. It gained 2.8 percent to reach 31 percent and thus 29 seats in the Landtag.

The FDP just managed to get into the Landtag with 5 percent, which meant that the red-red-green coalition does not have a majority in the Landtag. The Liberals celebrated this "victory" as if they had performed a political miracle, a sign of how low political expectations have become in some places.

The results for the Grand Coalition parties are dramatic. The CDU lost 11.7 percent and dropped to third place behind the Left Party and the AfD which had 21.8 percent. The SPD suffered a further setback, reaching just 8.2 percent, a drop of 4.2 percent compared to the last election.

The governing parties in Berlin only won 30 percent, the worst result of the former "people's parties". The Greens also only managed 5.2 percent.

The AfD ended the East German state elections as expected. As in Brandenburg, it managed to finish ahead of the CDU and to establish itself clearly above the 20 percent mark with 23.4 percent. Even though the bourgeois media had not shied away from comparing him to the Nazis, after the elections their candidate, Höcke, presented himself as a proper bourgeois, open to a "bourgeois" coalition with the CDU. In the election campaign itself he had avoided neither hints at a seizure of power nor openly Nazi rhetoric; after the election he seemed more likely to be a "wolf in sheep's clothing".

A catastrophe for the CDU

Until 2014, the CDU mostly ruled alone in Thuringia, sometimes in a coalition. When the red-red-green

coalition won, the CDU/CSU called on the SED and the State Security to rejoin the Erfurt State Chancellery. The current CDU leader, Mohring, also supported the right-wing "torchlight marches" at that time.

After the election and above all after a relatively trouble-free government under Bodo Ramelow in Thuringia, which did not abolish the protection of the constitution but promised it new jobs, Mohring rowed back. For him, cooperation with the Left Party now seems conceivable, although not for his party at the national level. The fact that, at the same time, the CDU deputy faction leader, Heym, is toying with the idea of a coalition with the AfD and FDP, which would also have a majority in the Landtag, illustrates the deep crisis of the Union, which is being massively challenged by the AfD as the leading bourgeois force, especially in the eastern German countries.

While Mohring plays the local politician to the full in the election campaign, according to the motto: "What has Berlin ever done for us?", the federal executive of his party insists on the existing decisions, namely that there must be no coalitions with either the Left Party or the AfD.

Federal Vice-President Klöckner fears the CDU sinking into insignificance if these "taboos" are broken, just as Carsten Linnemann wants to prevent "arbitrariness". Here, too, the imminent collapse is feared or at least the end of the claim to a "People's Party".

While the statements of leading representatives of the Left Party raise fears that it would probably be opportunistic enough to form a coalition with the CDU/CSU, the emerging debate openly reveals the uncertain leadership situation in the ruling bourgeois party. Party leader and Defence Minister, Kramp-Karrenbauer, is a controversial figure, her possible candidacy for chancellor is constantly in doubt, while the possibility of another candidate weakens her role. The unsuccessful candidate, Merz, was able to get ahead of Chancellor Merkel via the Springer press. She "leads too little", the Grand Coalition "is ruining the country" and he can "hardly imagine that this could continue for another 2 years". He certainly knows someone who could do a better job as Chancellor, even though he now has an important competitor in the form of North Rhine-Westphalian Prime Minister, Laschet. What this all shows is that the continued existence of the "Grand Coalition" at the national level does not depend solely on the SPD's decision in December, but that further crises and ruptures are also to be expected in the CDU.

The question of a coalition with the AfD will only remain taboo as long as the European strategy of German capital and its most important party, the CDU/CSU, aims at forming the EU into an imperialist bloc capable of acting as a world power. However, the more this goal moves into the distance, the more the EU, and thus Germany, fall behind their rivals in the struggle for the redivision of the world, the more sectors of German capital will push for an aggressive nationalist solution, for an alternative to the EU strategy. Then the hour could come for a coalition with the AfD as an extreme nationalist, right-wing populist force.

The AfD has not only consolidated its electoral success in Thuringia. There is no doubt that the balance of power in the party shifted further to the right in favour of the wing around its top candidate Höcke and the "wing", the loose network of extremely nationalistic racist to fascist forces in the party. At the party conference in Braunschweig at the end of November/beginning of December, a further strengthening of these forces, behind the AfD fraction and party leader Gauland, is to be expected. The question at the moment is not whether the "wing" will become stronger, but only how much and in what form.

Only way out a government deal?

For the Left Party, its highest result serves several purposes. For the time being, the current leader is basking in the results of "its" top candidate and Prime Minister Ramelow. This is seen as practical proof of the party's suitability for government. In accordance with parliamentary practice, it also derives the right to

continue governing from this. The Left Party is also using its election results against the lying rhetoric of the "shrunk centre". On the basis of its government policy of the last five years, it wants to be recognised, not without good reason, as part of the "centre of society". It claims itself to be the strongest force for "democracy", which wants to talk about government, coalition and tolerance with all "democrats", meaning, that is, all except the AfD.

We do not want to try reading the tea leaves here, but the fact that the Left Party is "open" to an alliance, to cooperation and to tolerance with and by the CDU gives rise to fears of the worst. The leader of the parliamentary group, Bartsch, has admittedly stated that there are decisive differences with the CDU/CSU. But "solutions" would have to be found at state level - and for that the Left Party would have to have a "free" hand on the ground. After all, cooperation with the CDU has been working at local level for a long time anyway.

While the discussion about this is plunging the CDU into a deep crisis, the Left Party as the strongest force is pleased that everyone has to talk to it, that a coalition against the party is hardly possible. The fact that the CDU will talk to the Left Party is a "success".

With regard to the last legislative period from 2014-2019, the Left Party boasts that it has implemented or initiated many social policy issues. It has tried to push through a renunciation of neoliberal administrative policy at state level. Unfortunately, however, it was also tied to the implementation of the overarching federal laws, so that the major break with the restrictive budget policy has so far failed to materialise. An alliance of any kind or cooperation with the Union would also bury the last hope of this undertaking, especially in the case of a coalition between the two parties.

A red-red-green minority government, a continuation of the old coalition, which would be tolerated by the Union and/or the FDP, would be practically paralysed. Even the smallest social projects could simply be blocked.

The only way out that a minority government led by the Left Party would not bind itself to the CDU, FDP or even the Greens, for better or worse, would be for it to break with its parliamentary fixation, even if Bodo Ramelow, the "father of the country", would be hard to imagine as a prime minister fighting in the streets. In any case, such a minority government, which wants to get along without coalitions with openly bourgeois parties, would have to rely on the mobilisation of the party's voters and supporters, above all on social movements like Fridays for Future, on anti-racist and anti-fascist forces and on the trade unions. According to a survey by the DGB, the German trades union confederation, an above-average number of union members, 36.5 percent, voted for the Left Party, a sign that the organised working class expects real improvements from this election.

In any case, such a policy would require a break with the previous strategy and programme of the Left Party. A minority Left Party government would still be a bourgeois government even if it governed alone, but the mobilisation around concrete demands on the street and in the workplaces could bring a new, progressive dynamic into the situation.

Undoubtedly, given the orientation of the Left Party, this variant is extremely unlikely. But such a policy would have enormous advantages, even if Ramelow and his party were to be overthrown by a parliamentary majority. It would be extremely difficult for such a majority advance against to form their own government. It is precisely this unstable situation, which the Left Party considers to be the greatest of all evils, that could become an opportunity to build up countervailing power structures to challenge the other parties through the working class through massive mobilisation on the streets and in the factories.

How to advance against the right?

For the Left Party and its leadership, however, it is significant that their ideas are limited solely to the field of parliamentary combinations.

In the "liberal" bourgeois media such as SPIEGEL, Süddeutsche Zeitung or Die Zeit, the CDU is asked quite directly to drop its opposition to the Left Party and somehow to maintain Ramelow as Prime Minister. In contrast, the conservative media such as the Springer press, sees the "radicals" as election winners with, as it were, Thuringia lost between socialists and Nazis. Reference is even made to the infamous "Weimar relations". A coalition with the left is regarded as "breaching a taboo". The liberal media are practically concerned with stable relations, if necessary even with the Left Party. Finally, they rightly point out that the Left Party is by no means as "extreme" as the FDP and CDU conjure up, and is firmly rooted in bourgeois-democratic relations, parliamentarianism and the "social" market economy. For them, not so different from the Left Party itself and the entire democratic public, the real danger, and the only "extremists", are the villains of the AfD.

In the struggle against the right, the attachment to bourgeois parties represents a strategic obstacle for the working class. Without a political acceptance of the bourgeois order, of private property, such alliances and even more so government coalitions, or toleration of minority governments, are never to be had. In other words, in practice, they amount to an open subordination to the interests of the ruling class. Even if the "alliance of democrats" in the form of a government appears at first sight as a strengthening in the struggle against the AfD and its fascist allies, because it brings together more social forces and classes, in reality it represents a weakening of the struggle. Strengthening would only be possible if all the forces of such an alliance were pulling in the same direction. In the best case, however, the working class and capital move in opposite directions, paralysing themselves and therefore developing no strength in the struggle against the right. In the worst case, and this is always the case with coalition governments of openly bourgeois and reformist parties, the representatives of the left subordinate themselves to the bourgeois, thereby only strengthening their social position and weakening the working class. The fact that 22 percent of the trade union members in Thuringia voted for AfD illustrates the problem and the danger that even more wage earners will turn to right-wing populism if the Left Party, the SPD and the trade unions make common cause with the CDU and/or FDP.

That becomes particularly fatal in crisis situations, with sharp social conflicts and the threat of mass dismissals. Ethnic-nationalist and populist forces like the AfD can better present themselves as representatives of "the people" against the "democratic" elite, possibly garnished with racism, antisemitism and demagogic anti-capitalism.

It is therefore necessary to make the following demands on the Left Party in Thuringia: No coalition with CDU, FDP and Greens! Stop the parliamentary fixation! Mobilisation for the demands of Fridays for Future, for the social promises of the party such as free day care places, for minimum wages, against racist and fascist marches, for an end to all deportations!

These demands should be raised by anti-capitalists in Thuringia on the Left Party, as well as the trade unions and the remainder of the SPD. At the same time, however, the following remains true: reformism, whether with Ramelow as prime minister or in the opposition, cannot itself provide a convincing, viable answer to the current political crisis. It wants to avoid the intensified social conflict, which the election result also expresses, and is unable to face it. This requires a new political formation, a new revolutionary workers' party.