

ONLINE-PUBLIKATION

Institute for Critical Social Analysis

“Carrying On” in Uncertain Times

**The State of Germany in the
Run-Up to the September 2017
Parliamentary Elections**

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LUXEMBURG
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IMPRINT

ONLINE-Publikation 15/2017

is published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

Responsible: Henning Heine

Franz-Mehring-Platz 1 · 10243 Berlin, Germany · www.rosalux.de

ISSN 2567-1235 · Editorial deadline: July 2017

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Translation/Proofreading: Alex Locascio and Nivene Raafat (linguatransfair)

Layout/Production: MediaService GmbH Druck und Kommunikation

“CARRYING ON” IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

THE STATE OF GERMANY IN THE RUN-UP TO THE SEPTEMBER 2017 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS¹

Germany's Bundestag elections are a mere two months away and one thing is certain: unlike many other European Union countries, in Germany all signs point to continuity. During and after the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the eurozone crisis that subsequently hit, political and economic elites managed to avoid any large-scale collapse of the German economy and delivered stability. There were a number of “shocks”: the immediate banking crises of 2008/09, the crisis of the eurozone system post-2010 (affecting Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, and, above all, Greece) and the political crisis triggered by the sudden rise in the number of refugees from war zones in Northern Africa as well as in the Middle East in 2015/16. In all cases, flexible policies for the prevention of an immediate collapse of the most important political and economic institutions were linked to medium- and long-term measures to allow for a continuation and consolidation of neoliberal policies. From the perspective of Germany's elites, this is an indisputable success.

But it remains to be seen whether these policies can be continued in the long-term, or whether they have laid the ground for even greater crises that make “carrying on as normal” impossible. In the following, we will first provide a brief look back at developments that have taken place in Germany since 1990. Secondly, we will examine Germany's situation within the European and geopolitical context in order to outline the central challenges for the left. Third, the election campaign that has been led up to this point will be presented and the possible outcomes of the Bundestag elections discussed. Fourth, we will deal with the strategic orientation of the party DIE LINKE beyond the Bundestag elections.

1 THE POLITICAL CONTEXT: UNSTABLE STABILITY

In the last decade, Germany has gradually become the leading political and economic power in the European Union. The burdens arising from the high costs of unifying both German states have been largely overcome. Since the end of the 1990s, Germany's economy has been consolidated. The strong export sector (the key branches being the automobile industry, mechanical engineering, and the chemical industry) has begun to expand again. The export quota (the ratio of exports to gross domestic product) is at 46 percent, compared to 30 percent in countries of a similar size, such as France and Great Britain). In 2016, Germany had a trade surplus of 8.5 percent. Historically high levels of capital are thus being exported and as a consequence many countries have a trade deficit with Germany. International economic organizations criticize the level of investment in Germany, as well as wages and salaries – above all in the service sector – as being too low. Women are particularly disadvantaged by this.

The number of those in work in Germany has reached a historic peak and the official rate of unemployment is at barely 6 percent. The neoliberal labor and social reforms implemented by the social democrat-green coalition led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party or SPD) set in motion a wave of rationalization and flexibilization. One impact of this is the increasing number of precarious employment conditions (e.g. part-time work, pseudo-self-employment, and temporary work). Germany has, after Lithuania, the largest low-wage sector in the EU with 23 percent of its total workforce considered to be low-income earners. In order to make ends meet, many workers have to draw subsidies from job centers, despite working full-time. The pension level has been drastically lowered. Germany's traditional “welfare model”, with its comprehensive social contract between capital and labor unions, has been terminated. Cooperation on both sides – to the extent that it still exists – has shifted to businesses or the export sector.

Since 2005, the federal government has been led by Angela Merkel and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). Whilst in 2005 Angela Merkel campaigned on a distinctly neoliberal platform, the conclusion she drew from her near defeat was to largely rely upon a very flexible approach that involved “carrying on as normal.” The core neoliberal reforms were retained and partially expanded, but at the same time their actual impacts were, depending on the political climate, either dampened down or further exacerbated. Internationally, the current government has positioned Germany as a medium-sized power that is responsible for shaping policy at the European and also the global level. One area where it has proven very

¹ The following text is primarily aimed at international readers, offering them an overview of current developments in the build-up to the 2017 German parliamentary elections. Versions in Spanish and German are available at www.rosalux.de.

successful is in the transition away from fossil fuels and nuclear power and toward renewable energy. Germany has so far avoided taking part in offensive military interventions, but the Bundeswehr does participate in many international military operations (e.g. in Afghanistan, Mali, Kosovo and in measures to combat IS). A total of close to 3,200 German soldiers are active in such missions.

The two conservative sister parties, the CDU and the CSU, have twice entered into a grand coalition with the SPD since 2005 (once from 2005 to 2009 and again from 2013 to 2017). In the intervening years, there was a coalition with the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a liberal party which has had no representation in the Bundestag since 2013 as a result of suffering heavy losses in recent elections. These coalitions offered a solid basis on which to continue neoliberal policies, with simultaneous adjustment and further development. Thus, after the nuclear accident that took place in Fukushima in 2011, the government resolved to phase out nuclear energy. The expansion of renewable energy is being continued, albeit more slowly. The high share of brown coal in energy production has remained unchanged. In the current government, the SPD was able to implement a number of socio-political improvements, among them the introduction of a minimum wage and an amelioration of the hardships faced by workers once they reach retirement age. Investments in the care sector and early childhood education were also expanded. The party-political base for current policies is large. With the exception of DIE LINKE and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), it encompasses all parties currently polling higher than 5 percent in all surveys regarding the upcoming Bundestag elections in September.

Domestic security as well as the social integration of immigrants have become key areas of conflict in public debate, relegating social justice to second place. In 2015 and 2016, around a million refugees came to Germany. With failing states and civil wars raging in the Middle East and North Africa, and extreme wealth inequality in Europe and, above all, between Europe and Africa as well as Western Asia, the German population has become increasingly concerned about the consequences of this influx. Islamophobic movements have gained strength. Terror attacks against refugees and atrocities committed in the name of Islam are creating a climate of insecurity and fear. This is connected to the insecurity many workers face in light of the negative effects of neoliberal globalization and competition-based policies. Tendencies toward racist exclusion are arising in society's center ground. In Germany, the movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the Occident) and the AfD party have articulated these tendencies. The socially deprived by no means comprise the primary support for these parties. Such sentiments may be on the rise, but it should also be noted that one tenth of the population is active in efforts that offer solidarity and support to refugees, and two thirds can imagine getting involved. The majority of people living in Germany welcome the admission of refugees and see them as people in desperate need who should be given help. What is primarily regarded as a problem is the fact that immigration is adding increasing strain to a housing market already at its limits and politicians are doing too little to counter the rapidly rising rents in metropolitan areas.

80 percent of the citizens of Germany see the general economic situation and their personal financial situation positively. This is a record both in historical comparison and within the EU. However, people are increasingly concerned about growing inequality as well as its negative economic implications. For many years, there have been growing calls for the state to guarantee more social equality and public services (education, health, pensions, care, energy, transportation, etc.) and these demands have consistently found high-level support. In light of the high budget surpluses, at present people are mainly focused on pushing politicians to offer tax breaks for those households on low and middle incomes. However, the majority of the population feels that higher incomes and wealth should be subject to greater levels of taxation, primarily in order to allow for future investment without having to incur new debt. Great Britain's decision to leave the European Union has increased support among Germans for policies that strengthen the EU. At the same time, there is an expectation that regulation imposed by EU institutions that is regarded as too bureaucratic will be dismantled. There is now a greater awareness of the idea that European integration is both necessary and beneficial to Germany and that this requires great effort and expense. There is relatively little support amongst the population for military interventions; a majority voices support only in the case of acute genocide or a threat to the EU. A high percentage rejects arms exports.

2 GERMANY'S ROLE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

After the unification of both German states in 1990, the policy of intensified EU market integration, which had already been pursued throughout the previous decades, was further strengthened through the currency union. However, the intensified open economic competition between countries within the EU was accompanied neither by a sufficient expansion of the EU's institutions of solidarity nor by a harmonization of tax, finance, and

economic policies. Furthermore, in 2004 the EU expanded to include many states from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, creating considerable imbalances within the community which, in part, are becoming increasingly severe. The EU budget still amounts to only roughly 1.2 percent of the gross domestic product of member countries, which is wholly insufficient under current conditions. Various German governments have peddled the myth that an expansion and consolidation of the EU is possible without making any substantial effort to address the current imbalances, e.g. by offering solidarity and support for the Union's weaker members. Every state was made liable for its ability to compete and for the consolidation of its own budget. That led the youth unemployment rate in Greece and Spain to shoot up to 40 percent and it continues to rise. Fundamental social security systems (pensions, health care, and housing) were dismantled. As a consequence, the economic and political development of many member countries began to drift apart. In a few, basic democratic standards are being violated, standards that were a prerequisite for joining the EU (the rule of law, the separation of powers, the recognition of the UN convention on refugees, etc.). Using a combination of deterrence (constructing camps for refugees, increased deportations) and exclusion (expanding barriers and checkpoints), as well as agreements with the governments of transit countries and migrants' countries of origin, the EU is attempting to considerably reduce the number of those reaching its territory.

The contradiction between neoliberal market integration and approaches for democratizing and strengthening the rule of law through EU guidelines has further intensified. A few functional deficits of the currency union have been dismantled, but no real mechanisms of solidarity and mutual liability and support have been developed. The currency union thus became a repressive, undemocratic means of imposing neoliberal policies: from social cuts to privatization and the selling off of national assets to large international (including German) corporations, to the strengthening of finance capital. Germany's dominance as the strongest economic power has been further consolidated. There has been no effective resistance at the European level from any movements and parties on the left. At no time has the left been able to considerably influence the agenda of integration. This became particularly apparent during the economic and financial crisis.

Following the victory of Emmanuel Macron, a social-liberal candidate, and his party En Marche in the French elections, and given the pressure caused by Brexit, EU policies may have to undergo some adjustment in the next few years in order to mitigate and successively deal with the problems mentioned. This will also demonstrate whether the measures taken after 2008 in order to shore up the financial system are sufficient. One of the biggest criticisms leveled against current policies is that many banks are still too big, the shadow banking system has not been curbed, and the EU banking union has remained inadequate. Part of the public debt accumulated by crisis countries should have been cancelled. For the first time in the wake of a financial crisis, the wealth of the top 10 percent and the super-rich has increased considerably. Losses were borne solely by the majority of society (the 99 percent). Another, more acute financial crisis is possible. Privatization, financialization, and renewed attempts at deregulation increase this danger. Among the elites, there is increasing awareness that such a development can only be prevented if, besides the repressive authoritarian imposition of neoliberal rules, investment is also boosted. At the moment, approaches toward a common economic and structural policy, the expansion of infrastructure, and promoting development in structurally weak countries are being discussed. It remains open as to whether the treaties of the European Union will be correspondingly altered.

In any case, attempts are being made to strengthen the EU's military axis and to increase military spending. A military planning and control center is currently being constructed. Moreover, at the end of November 2016, the EU Commission also put forth plans for a common European "defense fund", intended to promote common investment in the research and development of "defense technologies" (for example, electronics, metamaterials, encrypted software, and robot technology) and common military procurement. All measures taken in foreign, security, and defense policy are also intended to automatically strengthen NATO and supplement its range of activities.

NATO and the EU's policies of eastern expansion, which both organizations have been pursuing since 1990, has led to a situation where pan-European forms of cooperation and joint development involving Russia, Kazakhstan, and the states of the Caucasus have remained weak. The EU has thus proved itself to be an imperial project with democratic characteristics and economic charisma. At the same time, this expansion was regarded as a threat, above all by the Kremlin, and seen as an attempt to isolate Russia. In the last few years, Russia has reacted to this perceived threat with a policy of military stabilization and the targeted integration of post-Soviet states that exhibits imperialistic traits. The EU (led by Germany and France) responded to the upheavals in Ukraine (in which the USA and the EU clearly intervened), the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the fighting in Eastern Ukraine with a combination of confrontational and punitive measures, such as the imposition of an embargo, and efforts to pacify the conflicts. No new effective Eastern policy that would lead to a real easing of tensions and cooperation has emerged. Approaches marked by military and political confrontation continue to predominate.

The USA's election of Donald Trump in November 2016 marked the escalation of a trend that had been building up for quite some time: In the future, the EU will no longer be able to simply stand under the benevolent imperial patronage of the United States. The security, economic, and general political interests of both power blocs continue to diverge. After all, it was none other than the USA's military interventions in neighboring regions of the EU that ignited a firestorm in these countries or allowed their conflicts to escalate. The policy of occupation or regime change in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Libya, in Syria, and in Ukraine as well as the USA's chosen path of confrontation with Iran have created a situation that places the EU under enormous pressure to take action. The deliberate fanning of the flames of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran by the Trump administration and the continued heavy arms build-up in the region calls the security of the EU into question. Many of its member states have openly supported or tolerated the policies of the USA in the past. But this could now change. When asked which country they see as a trustworthy partner in today's world, Germans placed the USA far behind China. There is still no convincing strategic answer to the changed international situation.

3 THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE RUN-UP TO THE 2017 BUNDESTAG ELECTIONS

2017 began with a political surprise: the then chairman of the SPD, Sigmar Gabriel, announced that he was stepping down, and the former President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, became the SPD's candidate for chancellor. He was elected as the new chairman of the SPD with 100 percent of the votes. The SPD briefly surpassed the CDU/CSU in opinion polls and Martin Schulz was ahead of Angela Merkel in terms of popularity. Many young citizens turned to the SPD. Suddenly there was hope that a political change might be imminent. Martin Schulz placed social justice front and center in his first campaign appearances, and also pledged to retract elements of SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's neoliberal reforms. Within just a few months, however, the tide began to turn: In April of this year, the SPD was still polling at 32 percent; now it is polling at 25 percent. Firstly, the change at the top of the SPD was evidently not sufficiently prepared in terms of substance. Secondly, in the eyes of many citizens, the party failed to offer policies that differed significantly from those currently in place. At three state elections in the spring of 2017, the SPD had to come to terms with three bitter defeats, which may have damaged its image in both the short and long term, reducing its chances for the Bundestag elections.

Only after half a year did it become clear exactly what election program Martin Schulz's SPD intended to campaign on. Its centerpiece is the stabilization of pensions (but not a reversal of pension cuts that have already occurred), tax relief for those on lower and middle incomes, the transition to a "citizen's insurance" in the health care sector, the expansion of childcare and education as well as boosting investment in science and research. An economic government is planned for the eurozone, and steps to ensure greater balance and solidarity within the EU are to be strengthened. The main points of this agenda could also be included in a grand coalition agreement. In the past, Angela Merkel has demonstrated a high level of flexibility concerning these issues and managed to prevail even in the face of opposition from her own party. It seems unrealistic that the SPD will still be able to gain a greater share of the vote than the CDU/CSU. The overwhelming majority no longer believes that Martin Schulz and the SPD will be able to achieve this. The SPD electoral program for which Schulz is responsible is one which espouses a "carry on as normal" approach with a greater focus on social and peace policy as well as proposals aimed at further integration within Europe. The initially expected break with the neoliberal agenda of Chancellor Schröder has failed to materialize; it seems the party is unwilling to engage in a real conflict, and the broad mobilization of wage workers, including left-wing social movements, has so far not occurred. Proposals to expand protection against the consequences of unemployment and improve further education options are not being consolidated into a true departure with the past, as embodied by Bernie Sanders in the USA or Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain.

In the last few months, the CDU/CSU has succeeded rather well in meeting the challenge posed by "Alternative for Germany." Declining numbers of refugees arriving in Germany, a restrictive policy toward asylum seekers, the relative success of measures taken domestically and abroad – such as the so-called "refugee deal" with Turkey's government – have contributed to this. The CDU/CSU has been able to gain 6 points in opinion polls since the beginning of 2017, and is currently polling at 39 percent. It is primarily focused on policies concerning tax relief, more public investment, and domestic security. This corresponds to its image as a liberal-conservative party.

For the very first time in 2013 the FDP failed to gain any seats in the Bundestag. Since then, it has found stability under its current chairman Christian Lindner, managing to once again get elected to a number of state parliaments. It is highly probable that the FDP will be able to overcome the 5 percent hurdle in the upcoming

Bundestag elections. It is currently polling between 7 and 10 percent. Another coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP (possibly including the Greens) is thus possible. The FDP is focused on creating an image of itself as a party of modernizers and economic innovators. It has prioritized the topics of education and digitalization. It wants to be regarded as a party of the future and of individual freedom. Questions of tax relief continue to be relevant, but are no longer of central importance. It wants to avoid once again being seen as the party of "high-income earners." In terms of EU policy, it is insisting upon ramping up austerity policies toward debtor countries. It also wants to considerably increase the requirements that immigrants have to fulfil.

Whereas the FDP appears to be undergoing a successful process of revitalization, the Greens' political utility is repeatedly being called into question. A year ago, the party was still polling up to 14 percent. This has since fallen to between 7 and 8 percent. This is partly due to the fact that the policy of green modernization has now achieved widespread support within Germany, even among large sections of the CDU/CSU, even if the demands of the Greens do, in many respects, go further than those of the conservatives, social democrats, and liberals. The transition to renewable energy is to be accelerated, and factory farming ended. Like the SPD, the Greens are demanding the introduction of a "citizens' insurance" in the health care sector, and are calling for further-reaching measures with regard to the regulation of the financial sector. In contrast, demands for a comprehensive redistribution of wealth in order to finance the social-ecological restructuring of society, which featured in the 2013 electoral program, have been withdrawn. Unlike in 2013, the Greens are working toward a possible coalition with the CDU/CSU. They appear to be positioning themselves as a party with an ecological focus that is looking to be a junior partner for one of the larger parties – enough to retain their core voters, but not to garner support from other sections of the electorate.

The CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, and Greens have enough policy overlap to form governmental coalitions, albeit in very different compositions. This will allow for current policy to be continued with a high level of consistency, with the emphasis shifting in one direction or another depending on the make-up of each coalition. The "political change" promised by the SPD, FDP, or Greens will be concentrated in individual areas. Any change will only be mild in character. The CDU/CSU's claim to leadership has been strengthened by the most recent state elections. After almost twelve years, some of them marked by severe crises, Angela Merkel's position appears once again to be largely unchallenged. At the same time, the brief rise of the Pirate Party and then of the AfD, as well as the huge fluctuations seen in opinion polls since spring 2017, demonstrate that major tensions are pulling the social-political foundation of the German party system in all sorts of directions. Germany's relatively good economic situation as a whole, and large parts of the population have up to now only prevented these tensions from erupting to the surface. New crises and abrupt twists that could arise at any moment still threaten to upset predictions.

The rise of the AfD as a national-conservative party began at about the same time as the economic and financial crisis. In the party two wings quickly emerged: as the national-liberal wing, which promoted a return to the Deutsche Mark and neoliberal economic policy, lost influence, an alliance of right-wing populist, national-conservative, and racist voices managed to consolidate their power. Parts of the party have close ties to Islamophobic movements and neo-fascist groups that openly advocate violence against refugees and refugee centers, as well as leftist and other democratic politicians. The future strategy of the party remains uncertain. As a few of the issues championed by the right-wing populist wing have been taken up by reigning political parties, there are increased tendencies toward pushing its racist and Islamophobic agenda. But this runs up against problems of acceptance, even among parts of its existing electorate. The personal and substantive conflicts within the AfD mean a significantly smaller number of Germans now consider the party electable, in contrast to the CDU/CSU. National support for the AfD has dropped by half since the summer of 2016. It is currently polling at 7 percent.

In the last few years Germany has witnessed an assault on aspects of gender equality policy from elements on the right, who have taken aim at the right to sexual determination, as well as other achievements won through the struggles of the women's as well as queer and transgender movements. This is connected with the (renewed) rise of racist resentment, which is not only directed against refugees. Right-wing extremist notions of a "white ethnic German" society are at play here. At the same time, there has been a strengthened mobilization of a non-party-based, organized spectrum of fundamentalist religious (particularly conservative Christian) nexuses emerging from civil society, representing anti-feminist positions, propagating conservative forms of family, and disputing a woman's right to abortion.

4 THE ROLE OF LABOR UNIONS

The power of German labor unions has been substantially weakened, primarily in the service sector, as a result of privatization, austerity policies, industry restructuring, the expansion of precarious employment, and aggressive employer strategies. Processes of negotiating social partnership no longer occur in many places. Many of the conflicts and strikes organized by the service union ver.di constitute fundamentally defensive actions, such as the large-scale industrial dispute against outsourcing by the German postal service (2015) or the months-long strike in retail (2013). The situation looks different in the case of hospitals, where, due to the increasing commercialization of the health care sector, care workers are now able to exert economic pressure through strike action. If, for example, in the run-up to a strike, patients who are waiting for an operation cannot be admitted, hospitals lose considerable revenue. Conflicts concerning the blatant lack of personnel in the care sector have led to one of Germany's largest clinics, the Charité Berlin, concluding a collective bargaining agreement in April 2016, which, for the first time, stipulates minimum staffing levels. This successful struggle found great resonance among care workers as well as in the general population, which led ver.di to start a collective bargaining round for more personnel in hospitals. In the summer of 2017, nationwide actions are expected, which will also increase pressure for a legal allocation of personnel in the run-up to the Bundestag election.

IG Metall primarily represents employees in the traditional export industries, in which – despite outsourcing, trends toward more precarious employment, a decline in commitment to collective bargaining agreements, and concessionary collective bargaining agreements – negotiating processes based upon social partnership still predominate. The last nationwide strike in the metal and electrical industry occurred in 2003 with the goal of finally introducing the 35-hour week – in place in west German states since the 1980s – in east German states. The strike ended in defeat. Before the last collective bargaining round in the metal and electrical industry in 2016, however, IG Metall developed a new concept for industrial action, which foresees the expansion of warning strikes for up to 24 hours. Such a move would thus allow IG Metall to employ a further level of escalation between rather symbolic warning strikes and an all-out strike. The 2018 bargaining round for the metal and electrical industry – which, significantly, will also be concerned with working time – should signal whether this specific action will be applied.

German labor unions are characterized by a traditionally strong closeness to the SPD, although the relationship has become more distant in recent years due to the anti-worker and anti-union policies of the SPD-led national government (“Agenda 2010” being the main example) and the founding of the party DIE LINKE in 2007. In the course of the economic and financial crisis of 2008/09, the CDU-SPD government increased efforts to integrate parts of the labor unions into their crisis management strategy by means of reduced hours compensation, cash-for-clunker premiums, etc. (i.e. crisis corporatism). The fact that this has had a positive impact on industrial unions is demonstrated by the alliance “The Future of Industry” created in 2015 by IG Metall, the Federation of German Industries (BDI), and the federal government. “The Future of Industry” is devoted to strengthening Germany's competitiveness as a global economy and promoting investment, and was later expanded to include smaller industrial unions.

Fundamentally, a strong turn toward the SPD by the unions can once again be noted. However, DIE LINKE has been able to establish itself among mid-level, often younger functionaries, and in a few sectors in which it has actively engaged in industrial action. The party has also met with above-average approval among workplace activists.

5 THE PARTY DIE LINKE IN THE ELECTIONS AND THE BATTLE OVER ITS FUTURE

From a European perspective, the DIE LINKE project in Germany has been a success. Its two founding parties were the former PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), which emerged from the state-communist party of the GDR (SED), and the WASG (Election Alternative for Labour and Social Justice), in which left-leaning social democrats, socialist intellectuals, and (union) activists had joined forces in 2004 as a reaction to the SPD's neoliberal realignment.

DIE LINKE is the only party in Europe with roots in both East and West European history. Within it, leftists from the East and the West have to deal with their past errors and mistakes. It was in a position to reorient itself in terms of its political program and strategy during the process of forming the party – first, as the Party of Democratic Socialism, then as a party constituting a pan-German left together with the WASG – becoming a sort of “bridge” toward a broader, pluralist left. From the perspective of leftists from the post-socialist countries

of Europe, in which the former leading political class of communist or socialist state parties has, to a significant degree, mutated into the leading cadres of the transition to post-socialist variants of financial market capitalism, the German DIE LINKE is notable. Those who had sought alternative paths to socialism as early as the 1980s constituted a large part of the “personal and intellectual framework” of this new party, the objectives of which were based on Marx’s proposition concerning liberation, i.e. rethinking the question of equality, liberty, and justice on the way toward a democratic socialism; “freedom without equality is exploitation, and equality with freedom is oppression.” The goal is to create a society in which the goods of freedom, democracy, social security, peace, and ecological wealth are accessible to all at a European and global level.

Today DIE LINKE is – along with the Greek SYRIZA, the left-wing parties in Spain (which in 2016 took part in the elections as Unid@s Podemos), Portugal (Bloco de Esquerda and the Communist Party of Portugal), and now once again in France (La France insoumise and the Communist Party of France) – one of the strongest parties of the left in Europe. With its parliamentary foothold, it lags behind the left in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Cyprus at a stable 8 to 10 percent of the vote. It is therefore about as strong as the left parties of the Czech Republic, Ireland, the Netherlands, and France.

The strategic aim of the party is a decidedly leftist, social, and ecological policy platform characterized by solidarity and the renunciation of neoliberal leanings and concepts. It wishes to contribute to implementing a political sea change. If “mild” political change is on the agenda, the left party would have no real place in a governing coalition at the national level, first of all, because it would be superfluous to requirements, and, secondly, because it would lose its own credibility. It would be a sure path to irrelevance. In the event of “mild” political change, it can advocate particular concerns regarding social and peace policy in opposition, as it has done more or less effectively until now, and thus influence policy. For 12 years, this has brought the party electoral results of 8 percent or more. A strategy of “carrying on as normal”, only with a few slight differences, can be very successfully implemented by the CSU, CDU, FDP, Greens, and SPD. This does not apply, however, to the left party, which would risk its own downfall and the removal of any left-wing opposition to social liberalism in Germany. Its goal, as its most recent party convention demonstrated, is not participation in a center-left government, but rather creating the *preconditions* for a *left* government in Germany of which DIE LINKE would be a part. These conditions, however, are not currently present, as the results of the most recent state elections and the positioning of lead candidates from the SPD, the Greens, as well as the left party and their poll ratings show.

Should “carrying on as normal” continue to dominate, those pushing for a political sea change see the EU as a whole, and the eurozone in particular, at risk and warn of disintegration. They expect that heavy shocks from further economic and financial crises, terror and wars as well as ecological catastrophes are coming and that our society is at risk of falling apart due to increasing uncertainty and the fear of social exclusion experienced by large parts of the population. Muddling through only buys time. According to those who advocate a sea change, this powder keg will continue to grow, while defensive forces will be weakened.

The main features of a political sea change have often been discussed. The four pillars are justice, security, transitioning to the social-ecological reorganization of society, and an offensive politics of solidarity and joint development in the EU and toward neighboring countries. This form of politics begins with redistribution – from wealthy private households and businesses to the public sphere, and from top to bottom. Those who fail to consider the issue of redistribution are serious neither about justice nor about social reconstruction. Without wholesale redistribution, the foundations of security – education, health, care, integration, culture and a sufficient police presence – cannot be guaranteed or expanded as needed. Complex and fragmented societies are precisely those that rely upon the wealth of the public sector. This form of politics must also be judged on whether it creates a pension system that is not just poverty-proof, but can also secure the standard of living already achieved.

Taking just redistribution and security in a comprehensive sense as a basis, other issues set to arise in the future can then be addressed: for example, the ecological renovation of the entire building stock of our cities, an energy transition that puts production and supply in the hands of communities, regions, as well as connected cooperatives, and which follows a departure from nuclear energy with an end to the use of coal; a transportation transition that paves the way to a society of the future that is rich in mobility but low in cars; and Internet libraries with free access to the knowledge of the present and the past. The German state should provide money for comprehensive experiments with new ways of producing and living, beginning with a basic income (like in Finland), and ranging from free public transportation (such as in Estonia’s capital Tallinn) to climate-neutral municipalities (as is the objective in places such as Ludwigsburg). In times of insecurity, diversity and experiments are the crucial prerequisites of learning for the future and being able to react quickly and intelligently to crises.

These concepts are also important across the EU. Decades of European integration through the market and competition between locations (i.e. decades of negative integration) must now be followed by decades in

which a positive integration, based upon solidarity and cooperation, is the focus. A currency zone without active redistribution, which strengthens the developmental potential of all members, cannot endure. A union of formally equal states, in which the strong hang the weak out to dry, is doomed to fail. The constantly invoked peace project that is the EU currently only costs us 1.2 percent of GDP. That cannot work. And an increasing number of neighboring states in which people have lost hope for a dignified life are succumbing to civil war and terror, inflamed by external parties and military interventions. European policy has still not learned the vital lessons from this situation. Crisis policy has, up to now, prevented the collapse of the eurozone, but it has not triggered a developmental dynamic of solidarity.

All of this has a gender-political dimension: a left-wing feminist sociopolitical position, which also plays a role in the electoral program and strategic considerations of DIE LINKE, gives orientation to the socially pressing question concerning a fundamental restructuring of the relation between care work and wage work toward a transformational perspective that is not solely focused on the “compatibility” of family and work at the cost of women. Rather, the fundamental question of restructuring social reproduction in its entirety is under consideration: What might a gender-equal and social-ecological transformation of society, one in which the interrelation between work and care structures, between structures of nurturing and provision can be created in solidarity, look like?

DIE LINKE wants to achieve a post-neoliberal social and ecological transformation of capitalism within broad alliances. But within the framework of capitalism and oriented toward socialist values, it already supports projects to transition toward a development beyond capitalism. DIE LINKE is preparing policies to link a democratic, inner-systemic transformation of capitalism with a transformation that transcends this system: a dual transformation. DIE LINKE does not limit itself to achieving a tolerable capitalism by fending off new conservative and market-liberal attacks, and then afterwards – cleanly separated from this foreseeable protracted process – striving for a socialist society. Rather, it looks to current struggles for any possible improvement for the population, together with other forces, seeking rudiments to develop the growing forces of potential socialist processes, institutions, and projects. Hence why the left party’s 2011 Erfurt Program states: “That process will be characterized by many small and large steps toward reform, by ruptures and upheavals of revolutionary profundity.”

In the elections of the previous year, particularly in the city-states of Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen, DIE LINKE achieved good results, while registering more moderate gains in other states, and, in part, enduring considerable losses. It is notable that the party has had relatively strong losses precisely in those milieus and social groups (workers, people with a secondary school education, those between the ages of 45 and 60) among which it enjoyed above-average increases between 2005 and 2010. But it did enjoy above-average gains among those under the age of 35, primarily in university and academic circles. However, the gains did not compensate for the losses for the simple reason that the younger age group is smaller than the older cohort. Current gains among certain groups of the population can, however, be traced back to the party’s clear position in social debates about global justice, equality, immigration, and the increased strength of the populist-clad right.

DIE LINKE’s electoral program adopted in June 2017 primarily focuses on the interests of its core voters (good jobs, secure pensions, a just social system) and connects these with the emancipatory concerns of feminist, anti-racist, and anti-militarist policies as well as the project of European and international solidarity. The latter concerns are particularly important to the young and more academic groups, which have recently turned towards the party. This adds a previously missing component, thus stabilizing the party’s current image to a certain degree. Further questions will not be posed until after the Bundestag elections in September. Faced with the perpetually at risk and fragile neoliberal politics of “carrying on as normal”, the left in Germany must be ready to put specific topics and demands concerning social, ecological, democratic, as well as peace policy on the agenda, and thus influence policy. At the same time, it has to work harder to bring about the preconditions for a political sea change, cultivate an effective social and political dialog, construct clear lines of conflict and prepare for an even more severe crisis. This requires dealing with the contradictions of such a double strategy in an appropriate manner.

Again, the question arises of what can be done to turn a fleeting relationship between the party and its new voters into a firm bond, without putting off the core vote? It is matter of forming a solidarity alliance between the lower and middle social layers of various milieus – an alliance that ranges from the long-term unemployed, temporary workers, and workers in the care, health, and education sectors to socially aware academics looking for comprehensive alternatives. First and foremost, it must reach as many of those people as possible whose personal situation is dire and who are deeply dissatisfied with the dominant politics. They are among those who have considerable concerns about the future and feel threatened by change. Secondly, it must address those who are still managing to get by, but are constantly stressed and overworked because they, for example, are faced with the task of fulfilling the very contradictory demands of wage labor and a family. Thirdly, the focus

should be on the critical, well-educated skilled workers, who themselves dispose of far-reaching opportunities for social participation, but have the impression that fundamental changes are needed in order to solve the many pressing problems of the future. They are seeking new ways to engage with and change society in a social and ecologically sustainable manner. Many have radical democratic attitudes. Such an alliance would constitute a “third pole”, a “pole of solidarity”, in contrast to the new right and the neoliberal leanings within society.

Such a “third pole” effectively already exists. It is most visible in the countless (citizen-led) initiatives to welcome refugees as well as in a wide range of social movements. But it has still not found an appropriate political outlet. This has to be worked at if the conditions for a sea change in society – and in government – are to be created. Here, DIE LINKE is an indispensable component and driving force. It has a duty to offensively occupy the party-political space to the left of the SPD and the Greens. Until now, the “third pole’s” foothold has primarily been expressed in the “solidarity-based center”, it has appeared with above-average might among the formally high-skilled, in urban milieus, and class fractions. The “third pole” still hardly has any foothold in the popular classes, in the at-risk middle, or in the precariat. This problem also applies to the party DIE LINKE, which has since become heavily academic. The “lower” is largely missing from the indispensable lower-middle alliance. DIE LINKE is no longer reaching large swathes of the popular classes, and is losing them to the right. Even more frequently, they withdraw and stop voting altogether. This class-specific dejection is an existential problem for the entire left.

A change of perspective is therefore necessary: a new class politics is required that does not negate the diversity of interests of the left mosaic, and which poses anew the old questions of “What is to be done?” and “Who will do it?” There are opponents, and they must be clearly named. Merely returning to the old class struggle is not an option. Racism, gender relations, and social questions are inextricably linked. Differences should not be treated as side contradictions; interests must be actively combined. This is only possible if it is carried out with the people themselves, if the party is present in their everyday lives, organizes together with them in their neighborhoods and the workplace, and helps people to empower themselves. This basis can be used to reclaim the credibility of party politics upon which functioning parliamentary representation relies. Concretely, that means going out and forging real connections with the popular classes. Organizing a stronger social base is indispensable to being effective on a left. DIE LINKE has managed to get a great deal off the ground in the last few years, such as organizing projects in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, or “outreach-driven elections”, the party no longer waits for people to come to them, but visits individuals at home.

Here the party DIE LINKE has a responsibility that the SPD and the Greens have (so far) not taken up: it must embody an alternative that breaks with the politics of “carrying on as normal.” At the same time, with a “new” feminist, anti-racist, and ecological class politics, there is a chance of overcoming the false antagonism toward supposedly soft topics. Feminism and ecology are not just topics of the elite – they are class questions. The “knots” of various relations of domination can only be severed if they are conceptualized together. Furthermore, a new class politics cannot be conceptualized within the framework of the nation-state. It must advocate for global social rights in an internationalist manner if it does not wish to produce new exclusions. Class itself is diverse: it is also female, migrant, many-colored, possesses diverse knowledge and various qualifications, and has different sexual orientations, cultural identities, and practices. And classes have also long been connected through labor via transnational production chains; or, at least, borders offer no boundaries to its exploitation. The social question must therefore also be posed from the perspective of migration. An approach that takes universal social, cultural, and political rights seriously complements a class-based approach. Both target organization and the common appropriation of the social conditions of life. The point is to process contradictions in solidarity; to create a new class politics connected to a democratic way of life. But this is impossible without a perspective for a fundamental social transformation. Our notion of a solidaric, democratic, feminist, anti-racist, post-growth perspective must be referred to by a new/old, unredeemed name, and we must struggle in common to imbue it with 21st-century meaning: socialism – a good, just society, characterized by solidarity; something simple that appears hard to create. Not everyone will be able to subscribe to this, but this is the sort of socialism that a transformational left should stand for within this political mosaic.