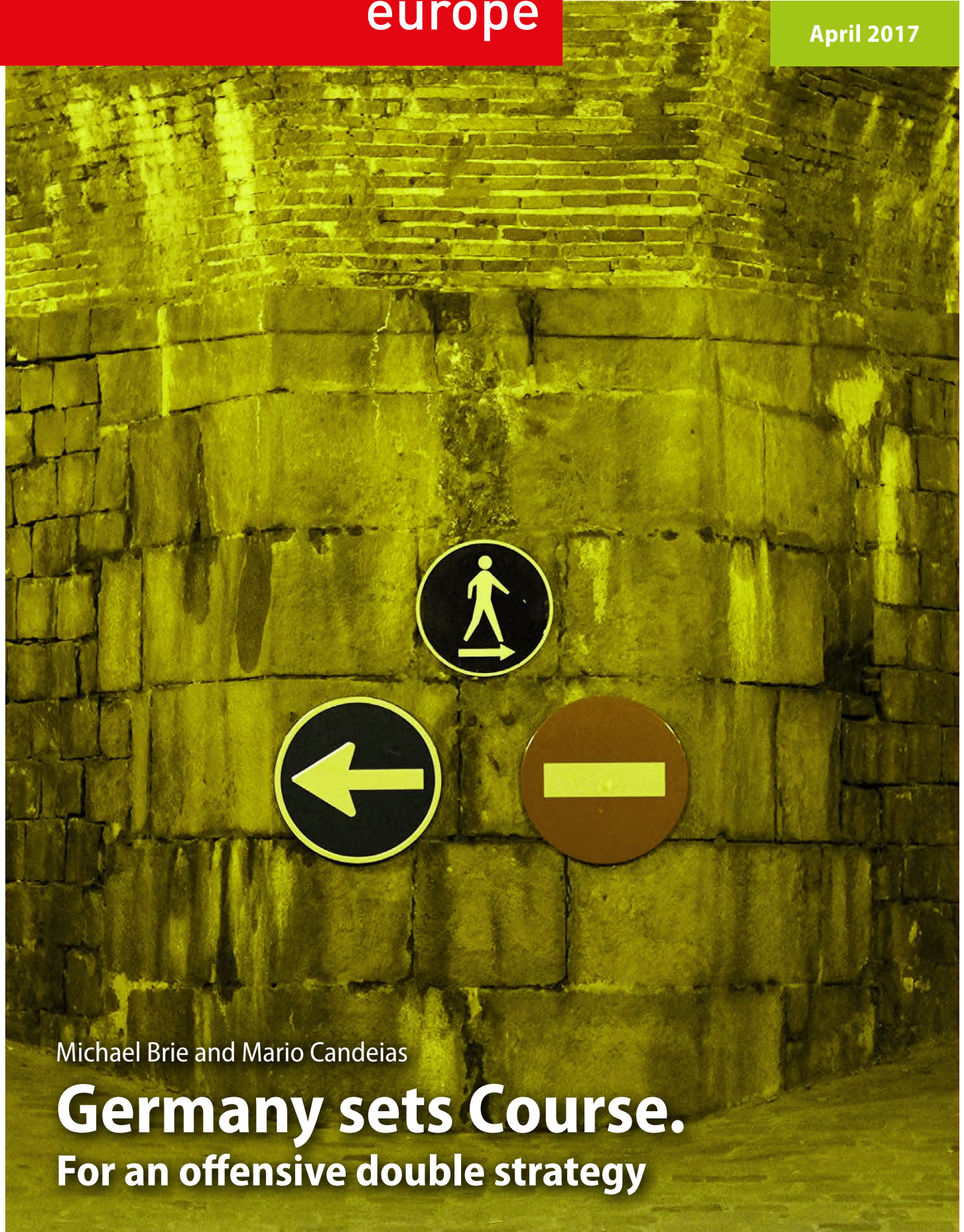




**transform!**  
europe

**ePaper**

April 2017



Michael Brie and Mario Candeias

# Germany sets Course.

For an offensive double strategy

Michael Brie and Mario Candeias

# Germany sets Course.

## For an offensive double strategy

Executive Summary	3
1. Times of agonisingly slow development and sudden turns	4
2. The three battle lines of the left in the crisis	5
3. The strategic tasks of the left	6
4. The current crucial question is: How does a left party address the question of governing power?	7
5. Potential overlaps and conditions for a change of course	9
6. Toleration and work on the “third pole”	11

*Michael Brie* is a philosopher, working at the Institute for Critical Social Analysis of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and has been the official representative of the transform! europe network until 2009.

*Mario Candeias* is a political economist, director of the Institute for Critical Social Analysis at Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, and Co-Editor of the journal “LuXemburg”.

### IMPRINT

2017 

transform! european network for alternative thinking and political dialogue  
Square de Meeûs 25  
1000 Brussels, Belgium

transform! europe is partially financed through a subsidy from the European Parliament.  
The German version of this article was published in the review LuXemburg.

This work by transform! is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at office (at) transform-network.net.

Layout: sanja.at e.U.

Cover photo: “left/right” by Roman Harald, <https://flic.kr/p/johAog> – Used under the CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license.



## Executive Summary

This paper on German politics deals with several questions: What is the current situation? How to organize a so-called third pole, the political camp of solidarity? How to re-organize the left party and how to handle the question of a centre-left government?

The opening up with Martin Schulz is a chance and a danger at the same time: he brings back hope to a deeply frustrated party membership and mobilises a lot of people to join the SPD. The danger: Schulz is not a lefty like Corbyn or Sanders. With the Greens, the situation is dramatic in a different way when measured against the challenges of left politics. It turned out to be difficult for the Greens to keep both of its political options open: a "Black-Green" coalition with the conservatives (including the conservative's right-wing populist faction, the CSU), or a red-red-green coalition together with the SPD and the Left Party – that would for the party and not least for its voters – place it under the test of being torn apart. Now confronted with bad polls, they are playing out the justice card, but with little credibility and two leaders identified with a green-liberal agenda. The conditions for a left government do not exist at the moment. We have to develop them first. The removal of the

barriers of dialogue between the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party is an indispensable step forward. But what could emerge from the commonalities of these parties right now is nothing more than a centre-left government on the basis of the existing rules of tempered neoliberalism. Fulfilling the double task – further influencing state politics from the left and working towards a radical transformation – would not be possible in that arrangement. For this reason, in our view, the question of participation in a governing coalition by the Left Party on the federal basis is not on the agenda, but rather the struggle over a change in direction of politics through societal and parliamentary opposition, or – possibly – toleration of a middle-left government.

And possibly on the way of re-organizing the conditions for an effective left government in Germany may rise, carried forward by society and social movements together. Then on the basis of effective social forces, a division of the ruling elite might emerge, and powerful left actors could possibly establish a firmly left government in the power centre of the European Union, and the approach that was developed before could be comprehensively implemented.

The future has gone astray. The neoliberal utopia is exhausted just as much as left alternatives are. The decades of an initially conservative-orthodox neoliberalism from Thatcher to Kohl, its generalisation under the governments from Blair to Schroeder, and finally its authoritarian deepening and anchoring in the years of the crisis, have caused social inequalities and dynamics, which are hardly to control. The structural crisis is not resolved and cannot be solved in the old framework. The attempts to stabilise financial market capitalism only extend the agony and tear apart the European Union and our societies. The situation is however not characterised by rupture; instead, an old quote from Gramsci applies: "The old world is dying and the new one cannot be born. It is the time of monsters." One such monster is the new radical Right in its various forms.

The political field currently is not being structured along the cleavages of left vs. right, but rather along the polarisation between a liberal and a illiberal capitalism, between the defence of globalised capitalism with modified means (Clinton, Merkel, May, etc.), and the turn towards a social-national and authoritarian ethno-racist gated capitalism (Trump, Le Pen, Petry, etc.). The good news is that the time of no alternatives is over. The bad news is that it's precisely the wrong alternatives which are opening up. A response to the crisis that is democratic and with solidarity is thus far absent. What dominates is the "loss of a general, positive idea of the good" (Eribon).

There is a great need for this idea of the good. Constantly new movements and initiatives are placing this idea on the agenda. Occupy Wall Street and the Bernie Sanders campaign, the womens marches from the US to Turkey, the passionate struggles for renewal of social democracy within the U.K. Labour Party or the German SPD, *Nuit Debut* and the militant strikes against the new labour law in France, the *Indignad@s* and the rise of *Podemos* in Spain, the activities for self-organisation and solidarity structures and the struggle for a left government in Greece and its course – the list goes on. In Germany there are the welcome initiatives – about 8 million people – for those who have fled to Germany, the demonstrations against CETA and TTIP or the De-Growth-Movement. Many people are pushing for a new politics of a good life, for a democratic mode of living within which dignity and solidarity are lived. But precisely in Germany, the neoliberal power centre of the EU, there lacks the integrative power to help the new world into being. The many lack the unifying force from which power grows to usher in a change of political direction. To contribute to this, to constitute, and to make visible the democratic camp of solidarity, is the common strategic task of the left. Hope and power must converge around a "third pole" – a pole of solidarity – to effectively intervene in the hegemonic constellation, the contemporary battle-lines between those "above" and those on the "right".

## 1. Times of agonisingly slow development and sudden turns

The last few decades in Germany were only ostensibly times of stability. In reality, the international situation has become increasingly dangerous. On the southern and eastern border of the EU wars have flared up or are smouldering, states are destroyed, disintegrated, without prospects. The attempts to integrate the EU mostly through markets and the Euro have brought the European project to the edge of collapse. Hope for social participation and wellbeing vanished; fear and insecurity are growing. Impossible to continue like that. Already, the constitutive politics of neoliberalism has become a politics of permanent crisis modus and state of emergency. Barbarism is marching fast. Such a situation generates tensions and strong contradictions. Left politics must prepare to fight long-term defensive struggles but also for very fast engagement in open

situations: the "war of position" can rapidly become a "war of manoeuvre" and then come to a standstill again. As of yet, the left is not prepared for such a contradictory strategy of alternating moments, neither intellectually, organisationally, nor politically.

We are in a situation in which no political *change of direction* is possible, but *modifications* certainly are – to the right as well as the left, more authoritarian but also democratic ones. Excessive inequality, the class question, and the heavy social dislocations in a "downwardly mobile society" (Nachtwey) are being discussed again. Correspondingly, large investment programmes are being debated likewise, as well as putting an end to declining pension levels, or pushing back against temporary contract work and precarious employment. In foreign policy, agitators are confront-

ed by opponents who expressly seek cooperative solutions. Already, some modifications to the Agenda-2010-politics<sup>1</sup> have been achieved: the introduction of the minimum wage law and more flexible regulations regarding the retirement age of 67. More of such things would certainly be possible – the discourse of the new social democratic leader, Martin Schulz, indicates that. For now, it's about partial concessions to neutralise growing protest, to absorb specific groups, without changing the fundamental orientation of politics – precisely in order to avoid changing direction. Such a change of trajectory would be confronted by the oligarchic power structures of politics, corporations, consulting agencies, hardened interests even from sections of organised labour, as well as institutional blockades at the global, EU and nation-state levels. And a change of direction must be financed. This cannot happen if austerity politics continues.

But neoliberal continuity is not secured. The crisis is too deep. That is why the left must prepare for a political crisis in which the ruling elite will not be able to continue in their usual ways, in which hitherto political approaches appear neither effective nor legitimate, therefore resistance massively increases, also under the banner of the new Right. At every moment, the possibility of a new, deep financial and economic crisis is conceivable, the acute intensification of international conflicts (even between the major powers) or massive terrorist attacks, acute ecological catastrophes, the rapid disintegration of the EU – such events have become possible again. This has unleashed a nervous tension among the rulers, who witness the rattling of their politics' fundamentals and assumptions, and under pressure from

the new Right. Sections of the rulers even increasingly see hope in the new Right, and are considering their options.

In an open crisis situation, a radical new situation emerges, wherein the elite becomes divided (Klein 2016), a change of direction becomes possible – towards an authoritarian gated capitalism or towards a restructuring based on solidarity. The left must become capable of intervening in such a situation. Yet it is not: the left is too busy with internal divisions and subtle distinctions. It also lacks imagination and possibly also the strength and willpower to face the severity of the situation and the danger of the crisis.

In the current situation, all existing ideas about how left politics should be done must be reconsidered. The possibility of a left turn appears nearly impossible, and is however more urgent; social-ecological transformation increasingly unlikely and yet more acute. How can the left, however, orient itself in these contradictions?

Saying what is, Ferdinand Lassalle said, is the first revolutionary act. What the Left in Germany needs first, is a consequent analysis and an open strategic discussion. All too often, different groups remain among themselves, fear that changes present danger, deny themselves an open self-critical discussion as well as challenging experiments. A common praxis and power perspective, however, cannot emerge spontaneously, but must rather be forged. This requires not a nit-picky divisive debate, but rather a connective perspective that enables a common narrative and corresponding praxes. Clarity is needed, to avoid sinking into the mash of endless ambiguities, from which anything and everything is justified.

## 2. The three battle lines of the left in the crisis

The societal left finds itself in a complex situation defined by *three* battle lines. *First*, precisely *it* has the task of defending liberal democracy, which it has always rightly criticised for its reduction to formal democracy with formal political equality and its limitation to the political field (with immunisation by economic rule). But losing this democracy opens the gate to open barbarism. *Second*, it must

protect what Wolfgang Abendroth means with “social democracy” (as political and social participation) even in its real-existing narrow form of a redistributive, paternalistic social state. Its authoritarian “modernisation” and austerity-political hollowing out has a triple effect: With the lowering of pensions, fear of poverty in old age has emerged. With the low-wage sector and the expansion of precarious

<sup>1</sup> Agenda 2010 was a comprehensive reform package passed by the SPD-led government in 2003, which, among other things, flexibilised the labour market, retrenched the social welfare system, and reversed progressive taxation. [Translator's note]

jobs, employment and income fears have become generalised. With the division in education and life chances, people are concerned about the future of their children and grandchildren. This triple fear destroys democracy and solidaristic cohesion, is the basis for racism and violence. Social, individual, and general security – it is increasingly obvious – are the indispensable conditions for freedom and self-determination.

Of course, the left cannot stop there, deflecting attacks against liberal and social democracy. *Thirdly*, it must go beyond, to develop its own practices of solidarity of societal organising and to a strongly radiating third pole, a pole of

solidarity (as a basis for socialist democracy). The alliance with the bourgeois powers in defence of liberal democracy is only persuasive when the struggle against the ruling politics is also effectively fought, a politics which contributed greatly to the erosion of democracy and thereby for the rise of right-wing forces. The defence of social democracy in its old form is not enough, because it has been outmoded for some time, it provides no solutions to the questions of a completely different class of wage-workers whose composition has become more feminine, migrant, heterogeneous. The left must therefore first undertake a political transformation of itself.

### 3. The strategic tasks of the left

This demands a change of perspective: a *new class politics*, which does not negate the multiplicity of interests of the left mosaic. This cannot mean a simple return to the old class struggle. Racism, gender relations, and social questions, ecology and peace, for instance, are inseparably intertwined. Differences should not be treated as secondary contradictions, but instead, interests should be actively connected with one another. That's only possible in conjunction with people themselves, being present and organising together in their everyday lives, in neighbourhoods and workplaces, encouraging people to take decisions and act together. On this basis, credibility can also be restored to the Left Party, upon which a functioning parliamentary representation can be built, a magnet for the many who themselves do not want or cannot be politically engaged. When speaking about the future, we must take the new democracy movements seriously. Representative democracy has its strengths, but in Europe the social and political participation connected to it is emptied. Representation and self-organisation must be brought into a new relationship. That requires new institutions, including our own organisations, and not least, of the party. They must become organisations where it is possible to take initiative in one's own hands, doing concrete and sometimes small things, but with a view towards society as a whole.

Solidarity initiatives could be important starting points for this. For example, inspired by the Greek example *Solidarit-*

*y4All*, the Left Party works on pilot projects of organising in deprived neighbourhoods. To organize in very practical terms, go out, and build real connection with the popular classes in the neighbourhoods, especially in deprived areas to build a base beyond the usual left suspects. This is a precondition for any left perspective to win real power to pursue its goals. This is why we started ringing the doorbells in former strongholds of Die LINKE and in deprived city areas – all over Germany, in every region. We trained Hundreds of activist in canvassing techniques, and keep trying to multiply the numbers. This will also be a central part of the electoral campaign – reaching out to the popular classes. And we will continue after the elections as a long-term project. We listen, we discuss, we invite to very specific local meetings centred around local problems – and we come back again, try again. The idea is not only to win members, but to build local nodes of resistance, especially around the housing question, but not only. This is combined with parallel training in transformative organizing.

In such initiatives as organisational nodes, "people's idea of what they can do" can be changed, to "develop, with them, a sense of their capacity for power" (Wainwright<sup>2</sup>), for a new inclusive *WE*. This is because the experience of the common imbues agency and restores the belief in a possible and practical change and in one's own future. Here too, approaches of a new emancipatory and democratic form of welfare could be developed.

2 Wainwright, Hilary, "Greece: Syriza shines a light", 2012, <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/greece-syriza-shines-a-light/>

Such approaches are thereby not only an effective counteragent to (right-wing) populism, but could also minimise dependencies to a (left) government and guard against clientelism. It doesn't limit itself to "civic activity" to compensate for the deficits of a slimmed down welfare state, but instead aims with actions of civil disobedience and direct expropriation for the state's reconstruction and democratic reorganisation. From this perspective, the expansion and democratisation of the welfare should reroute means and decision-making power into civil society: "In and against the state" (John Holloway).

Beyond this, what's required is a clear relation of antagonism, a constitutive outside. The current situation was produced, and there are political factions and classes responsible for. So it would go against the governing political caste, the corporations and the wealthy, who have emancipated themselves from their fiscal responsibility to society and fertilizing the commonwealth. It would go against the normalcy of corruption and greed, the competition fetish, which undermines the common, the societal fabric. And it goes against the political twins of "la casta", the self-radicalising right-wing populism, which seeks protection at the expense of vilifying other societal groups, foments hate and sows violence.

In contrast to that, we should say that we work to overcome capitalism, towards a society which Bernie Sanders uninhibitedly calls Socialism. Belonging to this are self-evident needs such as free healthcare and education as well as affordable housing for all; public services without charge, from libraries to public transportation; substantive democratic participation with the capacity to accomplish things; ecological reorganisation of cities, transport, energy supply and agriculture; much more time for each other and for living. Here appear the unsatisfied past futures that have yet to be actualised, from the French to the Russian Revolution to 1968 or 1989. As Corbyn says: "For us, it may be the same thing since the last 40 years, but for the new generation it is brand new." It's about ways within capitalism that lead beyond it.

Now the word socialism has become speakable again. People are jarred, they look it up on Wikipedia, they inform themselves. We shouldn't remain behind but instead name our ideas for a solidaristic, democratic, feminist, anti-racist, etc. post-growth alternative by its new, old, unfulfilled name, and fight together over what it should mean in the twenty-first century: Socialism – a good, solidaristic, just society, something simple, but difficult to achieve. Not

everyone in the "mosaic left" or in the "third pole" will support this, but it should be accepted as obvious, that a transformative left within the mosaic stands for *socialism*.

And we shouldn't be afraid to make it clear how we feel. The Right works with fear, resentment and hate. We must counter it with solidarity and hope, not as an appeal but as concrete practice. It is good and does good to act in solidarity. A practice of solidarity, furthermore, with refugees and minorities, as well as with those who've been declassified, and with the anxious middle-class: welfare/workfare recipients, the unemployed and low-wage workers, towards all those who, running on the hamster wheel, seek to acquire a "good life", and are sometimes angry at those who are supposedly less "productive". Not only do people want to feel that their interests are acknowledged, but also that their situation and existence is received with empathy. We must learn to create connections which lie beyond the discursive, all too rational, and bring forth, what in Spanish is called "Ilusión": *Ilusión* can hardly be translated, means literally in Latin "bringing something into appearance", a conception and a feeling about how something could be, not yet real, but can be sensed. Ernst Bloch called it the anticipation of another world. It is the desire, to live different and be different. We must practice that, it is another side of the factual analysis and debate, each must nurture the other.

And finally, the left must work on the perspective of political power. This should not be reduced to elections. On this electoral one-dimensionality is where a traditional parliamentary-orientation meets a purely discursively constituted populism. The episodic, but concentrated mobilisation can certainly achieve success, this is however precarious when the mobilisation is not connected to sustainable anchoring and organising. A political left in the representative institutions without a strong, independent, critical left in society, anchored in neighbourhoods, workplaces, initiatives and movements, is doomed to fail. If it succeeds however to revive the "heat flow" (Bloch) of hope, which draws its power and energy from the experience of solidarity and self-determination, then, even taking part in a government may be discussed differently.

## 4. The current crucial question is: How does a left party address the question of governing power?

It is a poor and empirically disproved argument, that societal and political opposition have no effect. The opposition can set fire under the seats of the rulers so that they must move. When they don't respect or fear the left, than nothing can be achieved. This is even true for Germany. Neither Bismarck's welfare state reforms, nor the workplace participation or the Adenauer pension reform would have come about without a powerful opposition. There would have been no plan to phase out nuclear energy and no minimum wage. It can be proved to the contrary, that the left often weakened itself through its involvement in governing coalitions, even destroyed itself when it was not connected to any left real power options which it could bring about. Quite so in Germany 15 years ago. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) became a party of social injustice under the government of Gerhard Schröder, and has only recovered very recently, but still far from old strength. The Greens participated in a NATO-war of aggression and the Agenda 2010, and dismantled the asylum laws recently. Left is something else. The PDS<sup>3</sup> and the Left Party had great difficulties in regional governments, not strengthening the left in society, and finally weakening the party itself. The actually decisive question is not whether to participate in government or not, but rather, how to strengthen the left and build real power, and with which means, in each concrete situation.

Usually, the governing question is discussed in a completely wrong way. In the foreground, it is asked, which single reforms could be pushed through and which not. But the question which must be posed regarding governing is not only *what* might be achieved, but also if the societal forces of the left would be strengthened or not. As Rosa Luxemburg said: Most importantly is the question of *how*! The *what* is built on sand if no societal and political forces stand behind it to defend and expand it. Working for individual reforms, not to mention for participation in government, that do not clearly strengthen the reverberating power and agency of the left, but instead, through them, weakens it and erodes its credibility, are a direct threat to democracy in the current situation.

But this answer is also too abstract: In our view, the entire left including the Left Party must prepare themselves for two very different situations for action. One is that the relative economic, social, and political stability in Germany may persist. Neither on the social nor on party-level conditions for a turn of the political trajectory will be present. That is the current situation. The other possibility would require the societal left and the Left Party alike to prepare themselves for an open crisis situation. Then a much more radical approach is required and a vigorous mobilisation. The question regarding parliamentary opposition or participation in the government must reflect the possibility of *both* situations. If participation in a governing coalition would weaken the possibility for the Left Party to stand up in an open crisis situation as a convincing alternative for a fundamentally different politic, than it would have historically utterly failed. The claim of the electoral alternative to represent an alternative trajectory would be relinquished. The strategic use value of the Left Party exists in the dialectic of "revolutionary realpolitik" (Luxemburg). As a party, it must work to create the conditions for a fundamental change *and simultaneously* achieve politically feasible modifications of ruling politics today. This is its foundational consensus and reason for existence. Both efforts must strengthen the other in reciprocity, wherein exists the "art of sailing against the wind" of neoliberal finance market capitalism, to recall Walter Benjamin.

Social Democracy today constitutes, in a double sense, the boundary of the possibility for progressive transformation in Europe. Without it, all left projects reach their limit, including movement projects such as those in France and Spain, but also in Greece (due to the negligible support from European Social Democracy). But this also unfortunately means that the possibility for renewal of Social Democracy is limited. A rupture of the kind sought but not yet achieved in the British Labour Party under Corbyn, would not be possible in Germany. It is questionable whether such a renewal would be possible in countries in which the position of a left social democracy is contested by other

3 The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) was a left party in East Germany formed in 1989 after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and was fused with the West German WASG party in 2005 into today's Left Party. [Translator's note]



parties. In Germany, large parts of the left social democratic spectrum left the SPD, and switched, through WASG, to the Left Party. Left politics in Germany must therefore also focus on applying pressure towards a left renewal of the SPD, and to openly fight against its current form, which presents a blockage for a left politics on the federal level. The opening up with Martin Schulz is a chance and a danger at the same time: he brings back hope to a deeply frustrated party membership and mobilises a lot of people to join the SPD. This reflects the strong desire for bringing back a social democratic discourse of justice. And most important this hope redirects voters from right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to social democracy. The danger: Schulz is not a lefty like Corbyn or Sanders. He was supporting not only workfare in Germany, but stands for austerity in Europe, crushing down the Greek Syriza government, pushing through TTIP and CETA, avoiding parliamentary debate and decision taking etc. Now he is propagating some social measures for a kernel of the "hard working people", the core employees. At the moment he is not aiming to do something for the poorest, for wealth distribution with higher taxes for the rich etc.– core issues for a left turn.

A sober look at the SPD shows: For decades, programmatically and personnel have been closely intertwined with neoliberalism, and that a leadership situated at the switch point of governmental and administrative power, lacks the potential for renewal. It is threatened consequently with missing out on the historical moment in which the "conflict between represented and representatives" becomes too large: "At a certain point in their historical lives, social classes become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organisational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression" (Gramsci, 1992: 210). The societal groups turn away towards the right

or left. That is the point where such parties become politically meaningless. The Greek PASOK is a political corpse, the Spanish PSOE finds itself in the most difficult existential crisis since its founding, and the French PS has little chances in the polls.

Before the "so-called Schulz effect" the poll numbers for the SPD lie near the 20% mark and have shrunk nearly in half since the election of 1998 (40.9%). Now, for the moment, they are back at 30% or so. But the SPD holds tightly onto a government which ruthlessly forced through an authoritarian neoliberal crisis regime throughout Europe, and relentlessly carries out the destruction of any alternative, and by the way dismantling the asylum laws. So is all that just loose talk? A renewal of the Jeremy Corbyn kind is currently foreclosed in the SPD. But in no way however, should a (more or less opportunistic) change be fully omitted – even for pure self-preservation, in view of the list of their sister parties threatened with elimination. This possibility must also be considered, but not however over-estimated. Opportunism suffices only for the modification of politics. A real change of trajectory together with the SPD in the current moment seems unrealistic.

With the Greens, the situation is dramatic in a different way when measured against the challenges of left politics. Its position was relatively stable, with minor electoral variations up and down. But it would not be easy for the Greens to keep both of its political options open: a "Black-Green" coalition with the conservatives (including the conservative's right-wing populist faction, the CSU), or an unpopular red-red-green coalition together with the SPD and the Left Party – that would for the party and not least for its voters – place it under the test of being torn apart. It too embodies no political change of trajectory, but rather just a "green thread" in the mesh of finance-market capitalism. Now confronted with bad polls, they are playing out the justice card, but with little credibility and two leaders identified with a green-liberal agenda.

## 5. Potential overlaps and conditions for a change of course

If a change of trajectory in the country is currently blocked, what does this mean for the Left Party with view towards the question of opposition or governing? *The strategic goal of the Left Party should be a left government in Germany that has a strong civil society as critical partner.* This would be a

government of hope and powerful entry into transformation, a government of the "third pole", the camp of solidarity. Therefore, the party should partake in an electoral strategy in the sense of a "spirit of cleavage" (Gramsci), a spirit which delineates a boundary, and also makes clear the will

for a societal project without sectarianism and one which transcends its own party. The conditions for a left government however are not yet established.

On October 18 2016, hundreds of parliamentary representatives of the SPD, Left Party, and the Greens met to explore the possibilities of a governing coalition on the federal level. This was long overdue. Since 2005 there has ruled the demobilising contention that this is impossible. The search for left alternatives that join hope with power was almost completely abandoned. The assumption was that this cannot be brought about anyway. But why not a coalition of the three parties? It appears simple, even if difficult to realise: One explores commonalities, agrees on a list of projects which each favours, neutralises the fields where a common denominator is not in sight, and develops trust which also passes stress tests.

The opening of the three parties to a serious exploration of possible collaboration on the federal level is an important building block toward breaking the barriers preventing a change of political direction. Yet, the danger is very, very large, namely, that too short of a leap would be made – with devastating consequences. One would like to say with Brecht: “We would be good – instead of low. But our condition’s such it can’t be so.”

There appears more or less to be a consensus around what’s not possible for the Left party: No participation in a government that decides on more military interventions, privatisation, or new cuts to social welfare, not even in exchange for positive reforms. But what could be the minimal conditions as positive realisable elements, which could also be communicated or advanced through public participation and social movements, and collectively realised? Which positive elements with the actually existing partners would be realisable? Which elements could be agreed upon? Let’s try briefly to identify positive overlaps rather than dividing points.

**(1)** An initiative for diversity and hope, which connects the expansion of social infrastructures (health, education, and housing) “for all” and the integration of refugees with a redistribution of wealth for a social-ecological investment offensive, which also massively creates new jobs – five or more percent of the Gross

Domestic Product or so. That also means putting an end to Schäuble’s austerity, and taxing large incomes and wealth. The Greens have developed appropriate conceptions and following a failed election initially banned this idea to the basement. Now there are new proposals. The SPD worked quietly on a “feasible” property tax – this of course may be too small, but it is a starting point. Would Schulz embrace it? Unclear for the moment.

**(2)** On the European level, an initiative for the adequate taxation of property, but also of specific financial operations is imaginable. Major overlaps exist between the trade unions’ “Marshall Plan for Europe”, the “Green New Deal” of the Greens, and the “compensatory union” of the Left Party. And not least, the long awaited Financial Transaction Tax could finally be implemented, thanks ironically to Brexit. Also the fight against tax havens could be more consequently pursued on the European level or even by single states (see USA). It will be more difficult to address the problem of removing export surpluses of the German economy of between 6 and 7 percent of the Gross National Product, and to redirect it towards domestic investment or to connect it to a solidaristic rebalancing of the EU. This is not possible without beginning the process of comprehensive structural change of German export industry and economy as part of the transformation of the economic structure of the EU.

**(3)** There are also commonalities in the need for pension reform to stabilise pension levels and to prevent poverty of children and among the elderly as well as the rejection of private provisioning. Hartz-IV<sup>4</sup> will surely not be abolished, but steps towards basic security free from poverty and sanctions and minimal retirement allowance would be essential. Also the regulation of temporary and contract work, the strengthening of collective bargaining commitments, for instance, through general inclusion, and pay-rate committed laws fall in the area of collective possibility, just as do measures against rising rents and for the expansion of social housing.

4 The Hartz-IV reform took effect in 2005 and lowered financial support for people out of work and increased pressure upon them to find employment. [Translator’s note]

- (4) Certainly, there will be no exit from NATO and no immediate end to weapon exports – but what’s definitely conceivable is the phasing out of foreign military interventions, a significant reduction in arms exports, and an end to weapon shipments into conflict zones or to actors directly or indirectly involved in conflicts (e.g. Saudi Arabia). Instead, commonalities would be found in the strengthening of priorities for non-military conflict resolution, with the expansion of mediating rolls, redirecting military support into non-military reconstruction aid (also financial). A common peace initiative would need to be connected to the cessation of one-sided economic and trade agreements, involving not only a rejection of CETA, TTIP and TISA, but also of the innumerable Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).
- (5) And not least, the extension of possibilities for democratic participation onto all levels is absolutely a shared goal, although with very different nuances. Included in this would be that the state (local, regional, state-wide, federal, and in the EU) must take on important tasks of planning and steering investment, e.g. with the conversion of brown coal regions and the just transition for employees and local people, or with the social-ecological reconstruction of urban and rural areas, including mobility, and building up to the transition towards organic agriculture. Central to this is the relief and

funding of re-communalisation of public services and the funding of communal associations and solidaristic economies.

On all of these points there are certainly programmatic overlaps for common reforms. Yet on every one of these points, the resistance from economic, media, and vested interests would be enormous, also from the inner circles of the SPD and Greens. Also the idea of placing the common ahead of the divisions would be thwarted in concrete policy work, which would be confronted harshly on the national and European level, and would be quickly confronted, not only for the sake of reputation, but also to mitigate the confrontation with powerful interests, with specific power factions in society, and even inside the SPD and the Greens. We regard this minimal program with today’s actually-existing SPD and Greens as non-viable at the moment.

The Left would come under enormous pressure to accept unpalatable compromises in order to realise some of the mentioned goals. This requires more spine than most have, namely, possibly terminating the coalition or toleration. The party is not prepared for such challenges – and nor is its societal support base. It’s participation in government always endangers its societal standing, its extra-parliamentary support. Often, nearly always, the Left Party is weaker after its participation in government, also because the government is not used for the broadening of its societal basis.

## 6. Toleration and work on the “third pole”

If it is possible to tangibly influence government politics from the opposition, and if it is not possible to form a left government and initiate a change of political trajectory, as presented in point 5, due to the absence of necessary societal and political conditions, than the Left Party should not participate in a governing coalition at the federal level. To do so would abandon a *realpolitik* that takes seriously the demand for fundamental political change. The Left cannot afford the luxury of holding and spreading illusions.

This position means asking the SPD and Greens during the election campaign, if they would like to take the risk of a change of trajectory or if they rather only want to modify existing politics. There are very simple questions which we should ask. Retirement free from poverty: Yes or no? End to austerity politics: Yes or no? Restructuring of the financial

sector: Yes or no? Publicly-steered investment: Yes or no? Social and ecological investment program: Yes or no? Turn away from the dominance of the export model: Yes or no? A real peace agenda: Yes or no?

If there’s a parliamentary relation of power that would allow for an SPD-led minority government, the Left Party could offer toleration. In former years, this offer was always turned down by the SPD. The path of toleration of a minority government was taken recently in Portugal. There, the largest crisis protests in Europe took place, relative to their population size, but these did not consolidate into new organisational forms and the impulse of the movement threatened to fizzle out. It found a temporary expression in good election results for the radical left: the communist-led coalition and the Left Bloc (8.27 and 10.22% of the votes). Against this

background, the toleration of a minority-government of the socialist party in October 2015 by the communists and left bloc, offered a chance to begin easing the austerity politics. This would certainly be a possibility in Germany too. Since 2005, it has repeatedly been raised for discussion by the Left Party. The proposal of the Left Party parliamentary delegates giving their votes to the current SPD-chairperson for Chancellor has been around for some time. Important reform projects to modify current policies could get off the ground – with retirement, minimum wage, basic income, housing, energy transition, additional and better modifications than the continuance of a CDU-led government – the commonalities are known.

As with a coalition agreement in a toleration, the minimum conditions and measures are also set in a clear contract. In contrast to a coalition agreement, “coalition discipline” is limited from the start. The Left Party would not be tangled up in ministerial and administration apparatuses which they cannot control, and they would have no ministers who would be compelled to frame the minor or even negative decisions and regressions as success. Instead, it could concentrate on the common development of reform initiatives and laws in parliament and in societal debates, without subordination of the party and parliamentary faction under the governing logic. Its own initiatives could be brought to the public (instead of just discussing government proposals). The party could further expand its function as a party demanding change and *simultaneously* achieve the possible in the form of an effective opposition or even hopefully an even more effective toleration arrangement.

And possibly on the way with successful toleration the conditions for an effective left government in Germany may rise, carried forward by society and social movements together. Then on the basis of effective social forces, a division of the ruling elite might emerge, and powerful left actors could possibly establish a firmly left government in the power centre of the European Union, and the approach that was developed before could be comprehensively implemented:

- (1) It would be a government that would halt the austerity politics in the EU and Germany, and support large projects for the solidaristic integration in the EU. That calls for the willingness to selectively break with rules of the EU and common currency, and to implement new rules. The accumulation of large property must be drastically taxed in such a situation. This requires comprehensive measures of capital controls.
- (2) It would be a government which initiates vigorous steps to subordinate the financial system to society and to an economy with a new approach. The financial sector must be significantly reduced. Fundamental protections for health, care, and old-age must be the exclusively public. The public banking sector must be strengthened, also through its privileging over the private sector. It would take priority over EU-competition laws. Systemically important banks which are too big to fail, would be broken up and socialized. As long as tax havens still exist, capital transactions with them would be dealt with through tax penalties.
- (3) It would be a government that launches a comprehensive social and ecological investment programme, with a scale of 5% or more of the Gross National Product. Only then could childcare, education, healthcare and nursing, a basic security free from poverty and sanctions, and the hindrance of child or elderly poverty, a quick democratic energy transition, the ecological renovation of housing and existing building stock, the transition to an ecological transportation system, as well as a solidaristic foreign policy, succeed. The social-ecological transformation of urban and rural space, and the transition to an organic agriculture are pending. Public services belong in public hands again.
- (4) It would be a government in which the state (local, regional, federal, and in the EU) took on important tasks of planning and steering investment. A left government would thereby also be a government of state restructuring.
- (5) It would be a government which would steer the export surplus of 6 to 7 % of the Gross National Product in large part to domestic investment, connected to a solidaristic re-balancing in the EU. This requires nothing less than a comprehensive structural transformation of German industry and economy as part of the change of the political economic structure of the EU.
- (6) It would be a government that really takes seriously the international responsibility for a global politics of justice, of ecological restructuring, and of the securing of a positive idea of peace (not just the absence of armed conflict and war), today and especially in eastern Europe, north Africa, and the near and middle East.



Military interventions and weapon exports to militarily engaged conflict participants must be ended by such a government. The arms industry must be reduced to the size necessary for a country's defence, with conversion of the rest.

The conditions for this change of direction have not yet emerged. That the toleration model, favoured here for *today's* situation is unlikely, has to do with the fact that the most elementary approach of the necessary political courage is missing in the SPD and Greens, and maybe of the Left too, a courage which would also be the minimal condition to discuss the governmental participation of the Left Party and to initiate a change of direction. A common government of SPD, the Greens, and the Left, right now, is a positive alternative only for a third of the population. And the ruling elites are in no way divided on this question, they would counter such a politics with unlimited resistance. The rejection of the politics of Oskar Lafontaine as finance minister in 1998/9 would appear as a mild breeze compared to what must be expected. And in the EU, neo-liberal politics are not by a long shot as weakened as they must be in order to initiate change.

The proposal for toleration should be brought forward with all seriousness. It would be the best possible scenario. It could make clear what could be possible even today. We offer this third option because a) there is no clarity about a left project, and b) there is no sober assessment of the societal and political fields or of the potential coalition partners, and so c) the debate appears to us to be stuck in the ascriptions of "grim opposition" and "power hungry government participation." In the current conjuncture opposition means, when things go wrong, to get a coalition government of the conservatives and Greens, or a continuation of conservatives and the SPD, with a populist AfD as major oppositional force. Toleration makes it possible to proceed from the identified overlaps with the SPD and Greens – insofar as they are really willing – towards corresponding reforms, without the tight confines of direct government participation that splits the Left Party and weakens it in society. In each instance, the membership (not just a party congress) decides over the entry into government, toleration, or opposition.

On the one side, the discussion with the SPD and Greens should be intensively engaged, immediately. And on the other side, and just as important, it's a matter of discussing with all those in society, who know that it's about a funda-

mental change in the direction of the economy and social policy, that it's about another mode of production and of living, about a change in the development of the EU and its global policy approach. Commonly we must produce an agenda for such a change of trajectory, offensively discuss it and establish with it, the conditions for a decidedly left government in Germany – this is a task clearly beyond 2017.

The conditions for such a change of direction and a left government do not exist at the moment. We have to develop them first. Therefore we have to reach out to the people and organize in their everyday life. The removal of the barriers of dialogue between the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party is an indispensable step forward. But what could emerge from the commonalities of these parties right now is nothing more than a centre-left government on the basis of the existing rules of tempered neoliberalism. Fulfilling the double task – further influencing state politics from the left *and* working towards a radical transformation – would not be possible in that arrangement. For this reason, in our view, the question of participation in a governing coalition by the Left Party on the federal basis is not on the agenda, but rather the struggle over a change in direction of politics through societal and parliamentary opposition, or – possibly – toleration of a middle-left government.