Germany: the Alternative-Green-Left "Network" is stillborn

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On June 6 some 500 members, ex-members and supporters of the Green Party met at Dortmund University. This meeting followed the official delegates' conference the Greens held in Bielefeld, which voted to support the line of the German government in the war against Yugoslavia. The Dortmund meeting was called by “BasisGrün” (Green Rank-and-File), a loose collection of party dissidents. Its aim was to lay the basis for establishing an Alternative-Green-Left “Network”.

The event rapidly became a grandiose abortion. After much squabbling, discussions and behind-the-scenes manoeuvres a resolution designating the Greens as a party of war was finally passed. The motion, proposed by Green Party founding member and former federal parliamentary deputy Eckhard Stratmann-Mertens, called for voters in the upcoming European elections not to endorse any parties supporting the war.

As a result, Annelie Buntenbach and Christian Simmert (both Green MPs in opposition to the war), as well as organisers Ralf Henze and Sylvia Kotting-Uhl, announced that “BasisGrün” would not be able to collaborate with the envisaged “Network”.

“We wish to continue to develop constructive left-wing concepts and political perspectives, and don't want to behave destructively towards the Greens,” said Buntenbach and Simmert.

This rift means that the attempt of the oppositionist Green parliamentarians to create a tool for their own purposes in the “Network” has failed. It also means that the “Network” not only has no clear programme; it has also lost the money and organisational structures that were to be provided by the Green opposition.

The course of the meeting revealed the lack of any serious political content. Those present were able to witness “rank-and-file democracy” first hand. The “chosen” speakers were allotted 9 or 10 minutes each. Regular participants, i.e., those who had not been “chosen” through back-stage wrangling, got just three minutes, and only if they were lucky enough to have their names drawn out of a hat—or rather, two hats, one for each sex. This meant that even women who had not planned or prepared to speak were called on, so as to ensure an even balance, while other men were excluded.

Much time was spent counting votes during the five-hour meeting. Most of these were simply procedural motions. Such delays (in the name of “rank-and-file democracy”) meant that the time left for participants' “free expression” was eventually reduced to nil.

Not addressed at all in the discussion were the essential questions, namely, the political lessons to be drawn from the development of the Greens. The meeting did not consider it necessary to consider the political and social causes for the Greens' support for the war. Instead, everyone was “agreed” that there was no question of building a new party, and that a social movement against the war was “not in sight”. A large number of those present took it for granted that manoeuvres with the Greens were unavoidable.

The biggest controversy was aroused by Stratmann-Mertens' motion calling for “no vote in the European elections for parties supporting the war”. Peter Rath withdrew his own previous call for a vote for the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—the successor to the ruling Stalinist party in former East Germany) in favour of this proposal.

Stratmann-Mertens argued for an organisational break with the Greens and distanced himself from the PDS. He did not advance any political or programmatic alternative to either of them, but his somewhat more consistent opposition to the war in Yugoslavia meant that he stepped on the toes of those who, fearing the loss of positions, sinecures and political connections, favoured keeping their opposition “inside the Greens”. For all their talk of opposing war, they had no intention of disrupting their wheeling-and-dealing in the various parliamentary committees, and state, city and local administrations.

A typical example of this group is Daniel Kreutz, for years a State Deputy in the North Rhine Westphalia legislature. He vehemently opposed passing the resolution that called for no support for “parties of war”. Opposition to the war was to be

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found “within all parties”, and such a call would only hinder and split the anti-war-movement, he argued.

Kreutz has a long political pedigree. For many years he was a member of the Gruppe Internationale Marxisten (GIM—International Marxist Group, which supported Ernest Mandel). Along with a majority of former GIM members he joined the Greens, in what was proclaimed an “entry” tactic. At the same time, a fusion of the remaining GIM members with the pro-Albanian Stalinists of the KPD/ML (Communist Party of Germany—Marxist-Leninist) established the VSP (United Socialist Party). Both GIM tendencies were devoid of political principles and denounced Trotskyists as splitters and sectarians. Today, Kreutz characterises as “splitters” those who would oppose the election of pro-war parties and thereby disturb his cosy relations in the state legislature.

Before the debate began, Federal Deputy Christian Ströbele, who had vehemently protested the bombing of Yugoslavia in parliament, was given a cake to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. After saying he was thankful the cake had not been thrown in his face—“It could have happened”—he said that he had been a member of the Greens for the last 20 years and wanted to remain one for the next 20. When the vote was taken on the resolution calling for opposition to pro-war parties, he ran up to the platform to see what was the result. Other Green Party functionaries were visibly nervous.

Once the motion was passed, Simmert—who had formulated the call to establish the “Network”—made a statement on behalf of himself and fellow Federal Deputy Buntenbach that they could not support the decision, and that they would no longer participate in any working parties. Early on Monday morning, organisers Sylvia Kotting-Uhl and Ralf Henze made a statement that BasisGrün would likewise no longer collaborate with the network.

On Tuesday morning, a further statement from Henze, the co-ordinator of BasisGrün, provided a glimpse of what had been going on behind the scenes, showing that political perspectives and principles played absolutely no role, or only a very subordinate role.

“Sylvia Kotting-Uhl and I have participated actively in the organisation of the Dortmund meeting. We travelled twice to Bonn for this reason and held many discussions in preparation. There were always problems to be resolved; compromises had to be found between the various participating parties. Several times we discovered that the compromises we had worked out were nullified by some new fait accompli. The passage of the ‘working paper' for the network meant our readiness to compromise had come to an end. However, we had to reflect the interests of the various regional groups in BasisGrün, as determined by their own specific situations.... Annelie Buntenbach and Christian Simmert, the Hamburg Rainbow Coalition politicians and other participants in the organisation were concerned to find an equilibrium between all the various interests. This also applied to positions in the working party.”

This arduously counterbalanced “equilibrium” started to totter when the motion calling for no vote for parties that support the war in Yugoslavia was proposed by Eckhard Stratmann-Mertens, and was brought to the point of collapse when the motion passed.

Sylvia Kotting-Uhl commented: “In such a sensitive context a destructive element is all that is required to have the whole thing collapse. And this destructive element—and I say this very clearly now—was Eckhard Stratmann-Mertens. Eckhard increasingly dominated every meeting, even when he was not there.”

The destructive spirit so bitterly plaguing the meetings was not so much the former Green Party functionary, but rather the objective problem that membership in this party can no longer be reconciled with even a semi-serious opposition to the war. (To complete the picture, it should be mentioned that the motion's proposer, Stratmann, as a former Federal Deputy, is just as experienced in how to manipulate votes and other behind-the-scenes wrangling as the organisers of the Dortmund meeting).

After the meeting it came to light that no working party or body existed that would organise or co-ordinate the work of the newly established “Network”. Nor would the money that it had been hoped would come from parliamentary salaries be forthcoming.

The meeting vividly confirmed that the construction of a serious political opposition is not possible without settling accounts with the perspective of the Greens. It cannot be expected that this will come from the oppositionist circles inside and around the Greens.

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