The German Greens and the nuclear industry

Dietmar Henning
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The very movement in Germany that 20 years ago was most vehemently opposed to the nuclear industry—the Greens—is today among its most stalwart supporters. The Social Democratic Party (SPD)/Green Party government has given the energy companies written guarantees that they can continue running their atomic power plants and transporting radioactive waste with virtually no limitations. The nuclear power stations presently operating can continue for many decades, and this year alone a further 24 consignments of atomic waste are to be transported across Germany.

Until a few years ago the Greens were organising protests against the dangers of nuclear power, above all, the transport of nuclear waste. Today they oppose such protests with the full force of the law and the police. This party, which was founded on a platform focusing on the protection of the environment and ecology, has transformed itself from a critic of the energy monopolies into their servant.

The policy of the Greens and the SPD flies in the face of substantial expert evidence of unresolved health and safety issues involving both the generation of nuclear power and the rail transport of atomic waste in special "castor" containers. These problems underscore the fact that the existing nuclear power system is incompatible with the interests of the general population, and above all its safety.

The Socialist Equality Party, while not opposed in principle to the development and use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes, supports a moratorium on the use of existing nuclear power plants and the construction of new ones until the scientific and technological means for resolving safety issues, including the vexed problem of nuclear waste disposal, are developed and systematically employed.

We are convinced that this cannot be achieved within the framework of a nuclear power system that remains subordinated to private ownership and control, and the drive of corporations for profit. The precondition for the safe and responsible development of nuclear power, in our view, is the establishment of a government of the working people, which ensures genuine democratic control and public ownership of the industry.

This standpoint, which bases itself on the interests of the working class and the struggle for a planned economy founded on socialist principles, is quite different from that which in the past animated the opposition of the Greens to nuclear power. As we shall show, the roots of their present capitulation to the nuclear power industry lay in the theoretical, political and class basis of their former opposition.

Popular protests, entirely justified, continue against castor transports and dangerous nuclear plants. But the question, how it came to pass that the Greens became an instrument of the nuclear industry against the population, still remains unanswered. It is necessary, therefore, to draw a political balance sheet.

There is much truth in the indignant exclamations of opponents of nuclear power that the Greens and their leadership have carried out a 180-degree turn. But it is not sufficient to leave the matter there, while adopting an uncritical attitude to the Greens in their earlier period. The evolution of this political formation was by no means unforeseeable. Its current policies arise from the political positions it advanced in its formative years.

The rapid development of the nuclear industry in the 1970s was in large part a reaction to the oil crisis of 1973. It was bound up with an aggressive effort to develop a national energy supply. Safety considerations were swept aside by the SPD governments of the day, first under Willy Brandt and later Helmut Schmidt.

Massive protests erupted in Wyhl and Brokdorf in 1973-74 against plans to build nuclear power plants. When in February of 1977 the prime minister of Lower Saxony, Hans Albrecht of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), announced that the salt mines in Gorleben would be utilised to store radioactive waste, new protests by the local population and opponents of nuclear power broke out. Such protests have continued to this day. Approximately 20,000 people attended the first large demonstration in Gorleben on March 12, 1977.

As one participant in these early demonstrations explained: "The thought of having gigantic cooling towers right outside the front door frightened the local population.... Information about the dangers of radioactivity provided by independent scientists caused my family and myself great consternation. How could our government, for which we had so faithfully voted up to then, do such a thing to us? At that point, our political consciousness began to change completely. We woke up. We understood that we had to do something."

This widespread mood among local residents against the policies of the SPD government intersected with disappointment with the SPD on the part of the petty-bourgeois radical currents of the *Ausserparlamentarische Opposition* (APO, extra-parliamentary opposition) that arose in the 1960s.

The APO had emerged as a reaction to the entrance of the SPD into a grand coalition government with the conservative CDU in 1966 and the passage of emergency laws in 1968. This legislation granted the government extraordinary powers to curtail civil liberties and employ the army in times of domestic "unrest".

The APO was influenced ideologically by the Frankfurt School and its best known representatives, including Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas. The Frankfurt School borrowed freely from the Marxist critique of capitalism, but rejected its core, the materialist conception of history. It rejected the conception of the class struggle as the driving force of history, putting in its place, in idealist fashion, "critical thinking". According to this outlook, the revolutionary subject was not the working class, but rather the critically thinking, enlightened individual.

Alongside the APO, a multitude of Stalinist and Maoist parties and groups ("K groups") arose. Notwithstanding various differences and polemics among these organisations, they were united in their orientation to the labour bureaucracies. They subordinated themselves to the Stalinist regimes or to the SPD and the trade unions. Despite their pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, they opposed the independent political mobilisation of the working class. On this basis, they helped Willy Brandt, after he became chancellor in 1969, to reintegrate the protest movement into the bourgeois political set-up on the basis of a program of reforms, particularly in the field of education.

Tying the "generation of 1968" to the SPD did not succeed, however, in the long term. The transfer of the chancellorship from Willy Brandt to Helmut Schmidt in 1974 heralded the end of reforms. Disappointed with

the SPD, the petty-bourgeois radicals turned away again, and looked to the rising movement against nuclear energy as a new field of operation. Here they met up with various political currents, including right-wing CDU members such as Herbert Gruhl, disillusioned Social Democrats, hippies, esoterics, religious converts and "eco-farmers".

In his book, *Green Turns Red—the German Left After 1945*, American scientist Andrei S. Markovits sums up the second half of the 1970s as a period which saw the development of an "eco-ideology". The "K groups", he writes, had finally begun "to critically question the limited view and positive attitude of Marxist socialism to economic growth, technique and the exploitation of nature". Markovits continues: "The ecological conception held the different left-wing forces together in the late seventies. A far-reaching definition of ecology served as the crystallisation point for diffuse interests and for activities in support of the natural and social structures of physical and cultural reproduction."

Markovits clearly sympathises with the middle-class radicals' attack on the Marxist view that the foundation of human progress—economic, social, political, and cultural—lies in man's increasing mastery over the natural world, of which he and his society are a part. The development of man's productive forces, including technology and science, provide the material basis for overcoming the evils of poverty, ignorance and exploitation. This material advance is concentrated in the heightening of the productivity of human labour.

Notwithstanding Markovits' own antipathy toward this historical materialist conception, in focusing in on the rejection of the Marxist view of social development, he puts his finger on the ideological axis of the Greens. They adopt an essentially negative and reactionary attitude toward technology as such, rather than identifying the problem facing mankind as the continued existence of an outmoded, irrational and exploitative system of social relations—namely, the capitalist system.

This deeply pessimistic outlook reflects the historical standpoint not of the working class, whose fate and ultimate liberation are entirely bound up with the development of the productive forces, but rather of middle-class social layers who despair of social revolution and instead seek an alternative to the evils of modern capitalism in previous and more primitive historical epochs and social formations.

The middle-class character of this political tendency is reflected in the eclectic, confused and unscientific character of its program—a program that rejects a class analysis of society and provides an ideological umbrella beneath which a melange of disparate social and political forces can come together. The main function of such a tendency, objectively speaking, is to serve as an obstacle to the emergence of an independent, politically conscious movement of the working class.

These features were clearly present in the Greens' first federal programme in 1980, which began by saying: "We are the alternative to the conventional parties. We came together from a union of Green, rainbow and alternative lists and parties. We feel ourselves allied with all those who cooperate in the new democratic movement: the various nature and environmental protection groups, citizens' initiatives, the workers' movement, Christian initiatives, peace and human rights groups, the women's and third world movements."

The defence of the environment became the political axis with which the petty-bourgeois radicals reacted to the end of the SPD's reformist politics. Their perspective regarding nuclear power was, like the political perspective of the 1968 movement, opposed to that of the working class organised as a politically independent and consciously anti-capitalist force.

Thus, while the socialist movement pays great attention to new and progressive technologies and advances in technique, basing its perspective on the democratic control by the working population of scientific achievements, and their application in a planned and rational manner to further the interests of society as a whole, the perspective of the Greens is and was backwards-looking.

Socialists regard nuclear power, in the first instance, as a promising and revolutionary technique. To utilise the enormous energy that comes from splitting the atom contains a fascinating potential. The present problem—and it involves centrally a social problem—is the fact that atomic energy is developed according to the interests not of the general population, but rather the interests of the nuclear power industry. As a result, a socially responsible solution of serious safety problems are subordinated to industry's drive for profit.

All of the social and political currents that merged later into the Greens expressly rejected an approach to the problem of nuclear power that was based on a historical and class analysis of capitalism. For them, technology itself was the problem, not its social application and control.

Such an attitude pursued consistently really does lead "back to the Middle Ages". This is shown by casting a glance at some of the figures in the Greens movement who express this perspective.

Although Herbert Gruhl was a peripheral figure inside the Greens, he confirms the class character of the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s. Gruhl came from the CDU, was for a short time a member of the Greens and left the party again in order to create his own right-wing group—the Ecological Democratic Party (ÖDP)—whose chairman he was for many years. By 1975 he was already arguing that the renunciation of material things was the cutting edge of all ecological values. This had to be carried through and "enforced" by a strong state. "To avoid chaos," he declared, the state must "decisively suppress many liberties".

Other tendencies also took up this retrogressive view. In her book, *The Philosophy of the Greens*, Manon Maren-Grisebach, one of the Greens' three federal spokespersons in the first half of the 1980s, presents an unworldly, esoteric, pious view as the basis of the Greens. She writes that the starting point for all their actions is the Greens' "sense of life", "experience", intuition, i.e., the irrational.

She maintains that the Greens would never move away from the values of democracy and peace (an assurance that has since been shattered by the record of the Greens in power): "They stick to convincing, to discussion and their own practical activity, which is a model of what can be brought about: Riding bicycles instead of driving cars, the ecological cultivation of vegetables, or at least buying organic produce, writing on recycled paper, building one's own solar panels, everyday things that activate others, but never coerce them. Such attitudes are so firmly entrenched they will continue [should the Greens enter into] government office."

This view is combined with an oft repeated criticism of civilisation: "No atomic power plants, no new media, i.e., no spread of new forms of telecommunications, no genetic engineering involving humans, no additional roads, airports, dams and canals, no large-scale industries, no animal factories."

Obviously, Maren-Grisebach badly underestimated the effects of social and political status. In 2001, the Greens ride bikes only in front of television cameras. Otherwise they rely on their cars, as, for example, the Porsche favoured by the Greens' parliamentary faction chairman, Rezzo Schlauch.

Petra Kelly, who originally came from the SPD and who in the 1980s was one of the most prominent Greens, oriented her policies, which were influenced by Christian beliefs, in a similarly retrogressive direction. Scientific technique and "a belief in technology" were the cause of all problems, she insisted. "Nuclear power brings about the police state," she declared.

This mixture of confusion and backwardness made it relatively easy for careerists from the periphery of the "K-groups" or from the radical Frankfurt scene to dominate the Greens. They used the Greens for their own personal "passage through the state institutions". The most successful representative of this species is the current foreign minister, Joschka Fischer. Another example is the present environment secretary,

Juergen Trittin, who came out of the Communist Federation (KB).

In 1984, six years before they resigned from the Greens, the radical "eco-socialists" Rainer Trampert and Thomas Ebermann, who were also members of the KB in the 1970s, wrote: "The principal target of eco-socialist revisionism [as they called themselves] was the naive belief of Marxism in the objective, neutral and emancipating character of science, technique and production."

Thomas Schmid, the well-known critic of Fischer and former co-worker on the anarchist magazine *Autonomie*, "overcame Marxism" with the realisation that "Industrialisation is the last and most destructive inheritance of a history in which humans made themselves the master of the world". The "social and ecological failings" are to be equally attributed "to the bureaucratic policy of the modern welfare state" and "the multinational concerns".

On the basis of such views there is little reason to polemicise against capitalist society or the so-called "free-market" economy. The Greens were thus gradually prepared by their practitioners of Realpolitik to collaborate with the Social Democrats, take on government responsibility and assume the role of lackeys of big business and large-scale industry.

Important stations on their journey were the accident at the Chernobyl reactor in 1986 and the collapse of the Stalinist states in Eastern Europe and the German Democratic Republic [East Germany]. After the devastating accident at Chernobyl, the SPD expressed itself in favour of abandoning atomic energy, which provided an impetus to those who wanted to move closer politically to the social democrats. Moreover, the disaster in the Soviet Union encouraged the rightward turn by the former Stalinist faithful, who made "socialism" and the working class responsible for the disaster, and not the bureaucratic, economically backward rule of the Stalinists.

In 1988, one year before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a paper circulated among the Greens entitled "To Be or Not to Be" noted, "The ecological threat of industrial society can only be repulsed within the context of the existing system." This orientation was strengthened by the collapse of the German Democratic Republic in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991. The Greens' federal election programme in 1990 stated, "A new form of production must be found, combining the advantages of the market in the field of supply with a planned structural framework."

In December 1991, the Greens' Ludger Volmer (today an undersecretary in Joschka Fischer's foreign ministry) and Wolfgang Bayer stated that after the collapse of "real existing socialism" the insight had taken root in the Greens' discussions "that functioning economies presupposed the existence of competition and incentive mechanisms".

When Joschka Fischer became the Greens' first minister at the state level in Hesse in 1984, this unleashed a discussion within the Greens over the character of their movement. Many saw the Greens as a parliamentary arm of the extra-parliamentary opposition of the 1960s, whose function was to put pressure on existing governments. But the acknowledgement of the status quo had its own dynamics. The highest levels of environmental pollution by the Hoechst company in Frankfurt occurred during Fischer's term as Hesse environment minister. Over this period Fischer had established a cosy relationship with industry.

In the 1990s, the debate over the role of the Greens was settled in favour of Fischer, Trittin and Co. In every election, the Greens strived for government participation, which they not infrequently achieved on a regional level. Taking over "responsibility", they gradually dropped their verbal criticism of the poor state of society, including the environment.

In East Germany, in particular, "protecting the environment" became a justification for closing factories that were no longer profitable. Hundreds of thousands of jobs in the East German chemical and mining industries were destroyed on the grounds that they posed an "ecological danger".

The 1990s was the period in which the Greens were consolidated as a party of the state. With their participation in the federal government in 1998, they returned to the point from which they had set out in the 1970s: in league with social democracy and, among other things, its defence of the nuclear industry.

The founding programme of the Greens in 1980 proclaimed that ecology was not a class question, but a question of humanity. Their own development, however, has demonstrated that the logic of the class struggle ultimately shapes ecological attitudes. Their current policy regarding nuclear power stations and castor transports is determined not by the ecological views of their founding years, but by their acceptance of the existing capitalist social order.

Environmental questions are inseparable from basic class questions. The protection of the environment presupposes that profit interests give way to the democratic control of industry by the working population. The prerequisite for this is a far-reaching social perspective in the interests of working people, i.e., a revolutionary socialist program.