The widening gulf between official German politics and the electorate

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"Wealth... for me means security. To be able to lose one's job without falling into a bottomless pit." Deutsche Bank chairman, Josef Ackermann

A survey of public opinion conducted by the Emnid agency on behalf of the newsweekly *Die Zeit* reveals broad opposition to Germany's grand coalition government of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD). Only 16 percent of those questioned believed the government is doing enough in the area of social equality and social justice. In eastern Germany, this figure fell to less than ten percent. Discontent exists with all the parties and is very common among those voting for the government parties.

"Can it be that this country has moved imperceptibly to the left," asks *Die Zeit* journalist Jörg Lau, commenting on the Emnid poll, "that today it stands much further to the left than it would care to admit?" Lau suggests this conclusion: "Large majorities in all political camps express support for more state intervention and against further privatisations, against nuclear power, against the deployment of German troops in Afghanistan and a halt to any further reforms. There are left-wing majorities for many issues—across all parties."

At a time when all the leading political parties in Germany are moving to the right, poverty and inconceivable wealth are growing at opposite poles, the government is handing over state assets to the highest bidder and the German army is once again waging war throughout the world, the results of this opinion poll are striking in several respects.

Among other things, Emnid asked the question: "Left and right are much-used terms to mark a political position. Where would you situate yourself?"

In a poll conducted more than 25 years ago, in 1981, 17 percent of the German population described themselves as left-wing. Today, it is twice as many, i.e., 34 percent. The ratio between left and right has been reversed. In 1981, 38 percent considered themselves to be on the right, today it is just 11 percent. Even in the CDU/CSU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), those regarding themselves on the left outweigh those who regard themselves as on the right.

This development is expressed particularly in response to social issues. Some 72 percent of all respondents think that the government is doing too little in the area of social equality. In eastern Germany the figure is 82 percent. Among those voting for the Left Party, the figure is 97 percent; for Green Party voters it is 93 percent. The figure stands at 76 percent among those supporting the SPD, and even among CDU/CSU voters, 60 percent think along these lines.

Similar trends are registered in response to questions about the social safety net. More than two-thirds of those asked support the introduction of a minimum wage. Seventy-six percent of SPD voters support such a move and more than half of CDU/CSU voters declare themselves in favour, even though the party leadership vehemently opposes a minimum wage.

The number of those rejecting the increase in the pension age to 67, championed by Labour Minister Franz Müntefering (SPD), is even clearer. Some 82 percent (in the east, 90 percent) believe the increase should be annulled, with 82 percent of SPD and 80 percent of CDU voters supporting the pension age returning to 65.

Two-thirds of those surveyed reject the privatisation of state assets. They believe that "enterprises such as the railways, telecommunications and the energy supply should remain in government hands." This figure is over 70 percent among those voting for the government parties—CDU and SPD—i.e., the parties responsible for the privatisations of recent years.

The neo-liberal arguments, according to which privatisation increases competition and thus boosts the economy, are no longer believed. Instead day-to-day experience has led millions to draw their own conclusions. The banks and large shareholders have raked in fortunes through privatisations, whereas ordinary working people pick up the tab through job losses, lower wages, higher prices and deteriorating living standards.

A majority also believe the state has a major responsibility for the care of children. Nearly three-quarters of those polled—both men and women—think that the state should do more to support young children. This makes the demand from the ranks of the CDU/CSU for a "home-makers' bonus" for mothers who look after their children at home seem especially desperate and retrograde. Far from being a response to 'popular demand,' the bonus idea is an attempt by ultra-right elements among Christian Democrats to suppress the widespread desire in the population for emancipation from oppressive conditions in the

home.

Although 76 percent of Green voters questioned considered themselves left-wing, they obviously have a different idea of what “left-wing” means compared to other voters. With regard to economic issues, they usually score closer to free-market Free Democratic Party supporters, i.e., on the right of the political scale. Thus, although a clear majority of Greens support the annulment of the increase in pension age to 67, it is markedly less than among the supporters of other parties. At 48 percent, Green voters expressed most support for the privatisation of public enterprises.

The rightward development of this erstwhile pacifist party is seen most clearly in regard to the deployment of the German army in Afghanistan. While 62 percent of all those asked regarded this deployment as “wrong” and only 34 percent called it “correct,” 47 percent of Green voters supported Germany’s military missions abroad. “The Greens as the last bastion of support for the army abroad, that is a rather dubious irony of history,” writes Die Zeit commentator Lau.

The Emnid poll confirms that the gulf is widening between official politics and the broad mass of the population. On questions of social equality and social justice, as noted above, the SPD and CDU/CSU, which like to call themselves “people’s parties,” receive the support of only 16 percent of the population.

Other polls confirm this result. In a recent study, the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research writes that satisfaction with the German health system has decreased from almost 64 percent in 1996 to barely 31 percent in 2002. The health “reforms” of the past five years have seen discontent continuing to grow.

The constant drumbeat from official political circles and the media about the “demographic time-bomb” and the need to “cut back bureaucracy,” the ideological assault on “sentimental social conservatism” and a “cradle-to-grave welfare state,” cannot hide the miserable reality. For years, the real wages and incomes of ordinary families have been sinking.

The number of working people with an income that guarantees a family’s survival is continuously falling. People can feel the effects of cuts in public spending where they live and work. In recent years, more than 500 railway stations were shut down, more than 10,000 jobs in youth work were destroyed and more than 1,500 public baths closed. Added to this comes the shutting of libraries, youth centres, information offices, post offices, etc.

Over a short period of time, 50,000 hospital beds were cut, while the number of patients increased in the same period by around one million.

Those are excluded from gainful employment are hit hardest. The so-called “Hartz laws,” introduced by the previous SPD-Green Party coalition led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD), cut unemployment and welfare benefits in a manner unknown since the days of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. The measures put pressure on wages for those with jobs and created the basis for a massive expansion of cheap wage labour in Germany.

After one year, an unemployed person is now entitled to only €347 ($US 468) a month in benefits. For the long-term unemployed, whose number remains high despite an economic upturn, this is little more than a pittance. This benefit level was determined quite arbitrarily on the basis of the consumption patterns of the lowest fifth of single-parent incomes—in other words, on the basis of the consumption of the very poorest layer in society.

This benefit level is not adjusted for inflation or increases in average wages, but is pegged to pensions. These have not been increased for several years, and only this year have seen an increase of 0.54 percent. Thus the benefit level laid down by the “Hartz laws” was increased in the last three years by just €2 to €347 a month. At present, nearly 7 million people are dependent on such benefits, with 1.3 million also holding down a low-wage or “mini job.”

Die Zeit is conscious that the political vacuum opened up between working people and the political establishment can lead to intensified class struggle. Jörg Lau warns: “If confidence in society’s equality of opportunity is lost, it can become a problem for democracy.” “Democracy” here does not mean the determination of policy by the will of the people, but rather the preservation of the capitalist order.

The role of the “Left Party” must also be seen in this regard. Established by long-standing Social Democrats, trade union bureaucrats and former Stalinists from East Germany, the Left Party seeks to fill this political vacuum to save the bourgeois order. The party’s left-wing rhetoric is accompanied by a thoroughly right-wing practice, evident to anyone aware of the situation in Berlin and the eastern German municipalities where the Left Party shares government responsibility. Here, the party is the champion of social spending cuts, privatisation and the destruction of public service jobs.

Only the building of an international socialist party that places social needs above the profit interests of the corporations can provide a political orientation to answer the needs of a working population moving to the left.