

The return of the Greens

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In the wake of the global financial crisis, Green parties in a number of countries have experienced electoral success. In Australia and Sweden they hold the balance of power between conservative and social democratic parties and have played a role in deciding the formation of the government.

The Greens are also gaining support once again in Germany, where the party shared power as part of a coalition government between 1998 and 2005 and thoroughly discredited itself by supporting austerity measures at home and militarism abroad.

According to a Forsa opinion poll released on Wednesday, the German Greens for the first time ever have the same level of support as the Social Democratic Party (SPD). According to the poll, if elections took place on Sunday, 24 percent of the electorate would vote for the Greens, with an equal number voting for the SPD.

Such levels of support mean that a coalition of the two parties would have a comfortable majority in the German parliament. With the Left Party polling 10 percent, the three nominally left-of-centre parties have a 24 percent lead over the current governing coalition. Since the election last year, support for the Christian Democrats has slumped from 34 percent to 29 percent, and for the Free Democrats from 15 percent to 5 percent.

Opinion polls are not election results and other polls have presented different figures. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Greens are experiencing a revival of electoral support.

In two German states where elections are due to take place next year—Baden-Württemberg and Berlin—the Greens are far ahead of the SPD in the polls. They could be the senior party in a coalition with the SPD and choose the state premier. Membership of the party is also growing and has surpassed the 50,000 mark for the first time since 1998.

What lies behind this revival of the Greens?

It is the result of a process of fermentation within the middle classes. In the decades after the Second World War, it was this social layer that ensured social stability and formed the backbone of Germany's so-called "peoples parties"—the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats.

Now, many within the middle classes have been affected by the cuts and redundancies resulting from the restructuring of the budget. Others have been forced into precarious, low-paying jobs.

The billions of euros freed up by the government to rescue the banks and cover their speculative losses have enraged these middle class layers and alienated them from the older established parties. An additional grievance is the highhandedness of politicians, which has driven tens of thousands onto the streets of Stuttgart, for example, in opposition to a new railway station. Still another is the capitulation of the government to the country's nuclear power lobby, which has revived the anti-nuclear movement.

Only the Greens have benefited from the loss of support for the ruling coalition parties. Studies confirm that the growth of the party is largely due to support from the middle class. Its new members typically have a university degree, are on average 38 years old, and have children. The strongholds of the Greens are cities with a broad academia. Here the party has been able to dramatically increase its level of support, including in wealthier neighborhoods.

For its part, the SPD stagnates at the depressed levels of its 2009 election results. Workers and the socially disadvantaged, once the main supporters of the SPD, largely associate the party with the anti-welfare Hartz IV laws, cuts in social program, and economic insecurity. They have turned their backs on the election process.

The Left Party, which is increasingly indistinguishable from the SPD, has been unable to increase its support level from 10 percent.

The turn by layers of the middle class to the Greens is based on illusions. The Greens project an alternative lifestyle, but their politics are not different from those of the other bourgeois parties. They make sure that the dissatisfaction and social opposition within the middle class is diverted into harmless channels.

Ironically, the Greens benefit electorally from their eclecticism and lack of principles. This gives them the ability to defend one and the opposite position at the same time.

The party depicts itself as a pacifist organization—but supports the war in Afghanistan and the transformation of the Bundeswehr into a professional army.

It complains about the destruction of the welfare state and the decline in infrastructure and education—but supports a policy of fiscal austerity.

It maintains cozy relations with the big energy companies—but claims to oppose them.

As a result of these right-wing positions, the media no longer has any doubts about the political reliability of the Greens and describes them routinely as a bourgeois party of the centre.

The party is just as opportunist in its choice of coalition partners as in its policies. In 1998, it hailed Red-Green (the coalition with the SPD) as the project of the century—and went on to introduce tax cuts for the wealthy, welfare cuts for the needy, and combat missions for the German army. Now it is prepared to form coalitions with the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats, even if this means—as has already happened in Hamburg and the Saar—that it is obliged to drop the central ecological planks of its program.

Once the Green Party assumes power in a larger state or at the federal level, its popularity will inevitably begin to fall again. It will no longer be able to disguise its right-wing, neo-liberal policies behind flowery phrases. This is what occurred 12 years ago after the party entered the federal government. At that time, the Greens lost a fifth of their membership and subsequently lost power not only at the federal level, but also in every single state.

It would be wrong, however, to underestimate the dangers bound up with a return of the Greens. Dashed illusions and broken election promises lead to

disenchantment, which can easily be exploited by extreme right-wing figures, such as Thilo Sarrazin, who are deliberately promoted by layers of the ruling elite.

The Greens see their main task as preventing disillusioned sections of the middle class from linking up with a broad social movement of the working class. The party seeks to dominate existing protest movements, while at the same time stripping them of any broad social and political content. Against a background of growing social tensions, the Greens seek to restore confidence in the government and the state. Should the current crisis of the German government intensify, the Greens are ready to continue the policies of Christian Democratic Chancellor Angela Merkel in a coalition either with the Christian Democrats or the SPD.

The crisis of capitalist society has reached a point where not a single social problem can be resolved without breaking the power of the banks and major corporations and reorganising society on the basis of a socialist perspective. This is precisely what the Greens vehemently reject.

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