

The protests against nuclear energy and the German Greens

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The recent protests against the nuclear policy of the German government and the building project Stuttgart 21 are being systematically exploited to increase the electoral fortunes of the Green Party.

The Greens have sought to pose as the leadership of these protest movements. In a joint statement addressing the anti-nuclear protests in Gorleben, the Green parliamentary faction and national leadership declared: “We represent this majority against the policy of the federal government.” Green Party leaders such as Claudia Roth, Cem Özdemir, Jürgen Trittin and others have traveled to Gorleben and used every photo-op to pose alongside demonstrators.

Broad sections of the media have reported on the protests in an extremely favorable manner, stressing the role played by the Greens. In an unusual statement, even the police trade union held the government responsible for the days-long blockades and conflicts surrounding the Castor nuclear waste transports last weekend, rather than blaming the demonstrators themselves and the Greens—as they usually do.

Green Party ratings in opinion polls have shot up as a result of the protests and the favorable media coverage. Nationwide the party is polling the record level of 20 percent voter support, and in two of the six federal states where elections are due next year—Berlin and Baden-Württemberg—pundits say the Greens could win sufficient support to head the state governments.

Five years after the collapse of the country's first ever social democratic (SPD)-Green Party federal coalition (1998-2005) the Greens are once again being groomed for government. The reason is not hard to understand. The ruling elite needs the party to maintain control over increasing social opposition.

This was precisely the role played by the Greens 10 years ago, when the party intervened to wind down the

annual protests and blockades of the nuclear waste transports to Gorleben. The Green environment secretary at that time, Jürgen Trittin, agreed a so-called “nuclear consensus” with the giant energy concerns, which in the long-term envisaged an exodus from nuclear power, while in the short-term guaranteeing existing power plants an average running time of 32 years. This meant that disputed nuclear reactors could continue running without disturbance—while all parties were fully aware that a new government would overturn the “consensus,” as has now occurred.

A component of the nuclear consensus agreed a decade ago was the resumption of the controversial transports of nuclear waste to Gorleben. Trittin's predecessor in the Department of the Environment, the current chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), had stopped these transports in 1998 because of alarming levels of radiation detected in the Castor containers.

When activists protested against the resumption of the transports, Trittin sent a sharply worded letter to the Green Party in the state of Lower Saxony, which was inclined to support the protests: “If we want to remain credible then we must accept the consequences of our politics. The conditions for the carrying out of the transports have been fulfilled and therefore there is no reason for the Greens to demonstrate against these transports.”

The task of the Greens in the federal government was not limited to suppressing anti-nuclear protests. In the face of considerable internal party opposition, the leadership opened the path for international deployments by the German army and, together with the SPD, agreed the Agenda 2010 program—leading to the most comprehensive welfare cuts in the history of the federal republic.

The recent images from Gorleben strongly recall

those of the 1990s prior to the entry of the Greens into federal government. Since then, however, political and social conditions have hugely changed. Europe is in the midst of its deepest economic crisis since the 1930s. Across the continent broad layers of the population are forced to pay the price of the crisis.

Powerful strikes and protests have developed in Greece, Spain and France in response. In Germany the government has so far succeeded in suppressing comparable social movements. This is mainly due to the trade unions which have exercised wage restraint for many years, supported the creation of a huge low-wage sector and backed the austerity measures imposed by the German government in the European Union.

Despite this, the Merkel government is in crisis. The reason is the breakup of those middle class layers which formed the traditional base for Germany's conservative and free-market liberal parties. The recent protests in Gorleben and Stuttgart are themselves an expression of the breakup of the middle classes. Characterized by social heterogeneity and political confusion, they reflect widespread discontent with the major corporations and banks and their political henchmen.

This is where the Greens come in. Their role is to prevent the protests in Stuttgart and Gorleben from developing into a broader social movement. The main complaint of the Green leaders against the government headed by Merkel and Westerwelle is that they have “deliberately revived a conflict in German society which had been pacified.”

Green leaders have taken up the immediate demands of protesters while at the same time categorically rejecting any attempt to link these demands to broader social questions. Although it is the same big business interests which back both the aggressive and arrogant stance of the nuclear lobby and the austerity measures of the government, the Greens have adamantly refused to impart the protest movements an anti-capitalist orientation.

Since their departure from federal government the party has moved even closer to big business. According to a poll of 800 high-ranking business figures conducted by the *Handelsblatt* newspaper, the Greens emerged best of all parties. In particular, the party received top ranking from managers of large-scale enterprises with more than 5,000 employees.

The Greens even justify their opposition to the government's nuclear policy by citing business needs. According to the statement by the Green Bundestag faction and federal leadership, the extension of running times for nuclear plants is “ruining the renewable energies business in Germany.”

Genuinely grounded concerns about health and the environment, as well as anger against the complicity of the government with the big nuclear concerns, have led to thousands taking to the streets in protests. For their part, however, the Greens and their backers in business and the media are cynically using the protests to prepare an alternative government that differs from the current conservative-FDP coalition in just one respect: that it implements the wishes and requirements of big business much more smoothly and directly.

Under conditions of a worldwide capitalist crisis, the protection of the environment together with the defense of democratic rights, social gains and other social needs can only be carried out within the framework of a socialist program, which attacks the evil at the root of the problem: the subordination of all economic activity to the profit interests of the banks and big corporations.



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