

Germany's Pirate Party reveals its true colors

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Since its surprise success in Berlin's Senate elections, the Pirate Party has used every opportunity to confirm it represents no alternative to the established parties. It has drawn into its ranks defectors from all political camps—from the Social Democrats, Greens, liberals and the Christian Democrats to the extreme right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NDP). Apart from the call for “more transparency”, there are no political differences between the Pirates and the other parties. Nor does it appear, on closer inspection, that they will seriously pursue the goal of political transparency.

At the national press conference on October 5, national chairman Sebastian Nerz referred to the Pirates as a “socially liberal party”, whose social policies were close to the Social Democratic Party's (SPD's) line and whose civil rights policy approximated that of the old Free Democratic Party (FDP). Nerz himself was an active member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) from 2001 to 2004. It is thus hardly surprising that Federal Development Minister Dirk Niebel (FDP) used an interview with the *Hamburg Abendblatt* newspaper to advise his party to “orient [itself] to the success of the Pirate Party”.

Party Chairman Nerz also stressed to the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* the Pirates' willingness to serve other parties as a majority maker. “In order really to be able to implement our policies, we must eventually take on governmental responsibility”, he said, adding that his party was “not afraid” to do so.

The Pirates are also pressing around the power troughs of Berlin, having successfully gained representation in the city's lower house administration.

A Pirate faction in the lower chamber has now been formed. Having initially engaged in all sorts of organisational issues—including the previously unsolved problem of their seating arrangement in the left-right spectrum of the lower house—a special faction meeting on October 5 focused on the failure of the coalition negotiations between the SPD and Greens.

The Pirate faction saw the failure of the SPD-Greens talks as a chance for itself to become involved in government. It ascribed the reason for the failure to a “misunderstanding and lack of transparency”, without criticising the policies of either the SPD or the Greens. It accused the SPD of trying from the very beginning “to form a grand coalition with a solid mayoral majority”, instead of “considering a toleration arrangement or other ways of forming a government”.

The Pirate faction stressed that it also would be ready to enter into talks. A coalition of the SPD with the CDU was not to be seen as the only possible alternative to the broken alliance between the SPD and Greens. It advised its own state executive “to signal

willingness to engage in exploratory talks in this respect”.

A few days after the election, the Pirates released the result of two polls on the *LiquidFeedback* interactive web site. A large majority (47 votes to 7, with 7 abstentions) refused to unofficially tolerate an SPD-Greens government and vote for Klaus Wowereit (SPD) in the mayoral election. An even larger majority (57 votes to 2, with 2 abstentions) expressed the view that the faction should not comment on preferences until they were asked to do so.

On October 9, however, the Pirate Party's state executive announced that it was prepared to enter into “exploratory talks for the sake of parliamentary cooperation”, and intended to make contact with other parties represented in the lower house. The person responsible for implementing the talks was to be Christopher Lauer, who had been narrowly beaten in the 2010 national election for party chairman. Lauer had engaged in the factions' coalition negotiations with the SPD and the Left Party.

The approach of the Pirate faction is remarkable in two respects. First, it unceremoniously flouted the wishes of the party's base by exploiting the *LiquidFeedback* vote to refrain from expressing preferences. Secondly, at no stage was it willing to discuss the substance of any policies.

Pavel Meyer, an executive board member and IT entrepreneur, described as bad news the prospect that the CDU will again participate in the administration of Berlin. But he said nothing at all about why a Wowereit-led coalition government with either the Greens or the Left Party would be any better. Over the past 10 years, the SPD-Left Party coalition under Wowereit has unleashed unprecedented social devastation on Berlin.

Nor is the Pirate Party different from any of the other established parties when it comes to issues of foreign policy or militarism. This was emphasised by a “foreign and European policy Barcamp” conference, conducted by the Pirate Party in Potsdam on October 7 and 8. Angelika Beer, a member of the Pirate Party since 2009, was among the 50 participants.

Like Jurgen Trittin, leader of the Greens in the Bundestag (federal parliament), Beer originates from the Maoist Communist League. She was a co-founder of the Greens, an executive member and chairperson of the party for several years, and a member of the Bundestag for 11 years and the European Parliament from 2004 to 2009. She was defence policy spokesperson for the Greens faction in the Bundestag, and sat on the Committee for Security and Defence Policy in the European Parliament. Beer was instrumental in transforming the pacifism of the Greens into the aggressive militarism that eventually expressed itself in the party's endorsement of the war in Libya.

At the Potsdam conference, Beer spoke about her area of

specialisation in a lecture titled “Conflict Prevention and Human Security”. She vehemently defended the new United Nations doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect”, which was supposed to justify, among other things, the war against Libya.

Beer stressed that “the international community had not only the right, but also the duty”, to intervene militarily “when a state threatens the lives of its own people”. She claimed this was a legitimate “exception to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states”. Her words drew no objections from participants at the conference. The discussions revolved mainly around the problem of how to define a “genocide” and “a case necessitating a defensive role” for NATO.

The Pirate Party is planning to hold a party congress later this year. It is unlikely that this will include discussion of foreign policy. Foreign policy is the fourth-to-last issue on the proposed list of 26 subject areas. Only “Construction and Transport”, “Animal Welfare” and “Miscellaneous” have an even lower priority.

In times when one imperialist war follows hard upon another, when German troops are committing war crimes, and when the German army is being reformed to give it a “high degree of mobility, technical and operational superiority, manageability and flexibility in the context of multinational and international operations” (to use Angelika Beer’s own words), the Pirates’ lack of interest in these issues is anything but an expression of a “pro-citizen and pro-democracy” perspective.

In early October, it was also revealed that two former members of the NPD were involved in the leadership of the Pirate Party. Valentin Seipt was district chairman in the Bavarian town of Freising, and Matthias Bahner was a member of the state executive in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, as well as district deputy in Vorpommern-Greifswald. Seipt had already been convicted for violation of Section 86a of the constitution (employing symbols of unconstitutional organisations). Both resigned from their party posts when their membership in the NPD became known.

It is hardly credible that these two neo-Nazis experienced a radical change of heart on joining the Pirates. In addition, the exposure of their NPD membership casts a long shadow over the Pirates’ professed slogan of the “transparency”.

The party is also divided on how to deal with this issue. National Chairman Sebastian Nerz spoke of “youthful indiscretions”. There would “certainly be a few more Pirates who were formerly in the NPD”, he said. Marina Weis, the party’s national director, distanced herself from Nerz, because she believed the words “youthful indiscretions” were “wrongly chosen” and “trivialising”. The Pirate’s deputy chairman, Bernd Schloemer, also said: “There is no place for former NPD members in our party”.

Extreme right-wing views on the European debt crisis are also to be found in the Pirate Party. In an interview with the financial web site *Handelsblatt Online*, Matthias Schrader—Pirate national board member, financial analyst and entrepreneur—justified his call for a reduction in the state debt by claiming it was senseless to “squander even more money”.

Schrader demanded strict adherence to the stability criteria and the formation of a core Europe. He said, “We won’t be able to

avoid setting up a core Europe, consisting of countries such as Germany, Austria, France and the Benelux countries with the euro as their currency.”

He continued, “We need a zone that is economically homogeneous and not, as now, in a process of complete disintegration. Of course, it would be open to other countries to join, provided they had reformed and stabilised their economic system”. When asked whether Greece would have to exit from the euro zone, Schrader replied, “Not only Greece”.

The editors of the *Handelsblatt*, the largest economic and financial newspaper in the German language, were obviously very impressed by this Pirate. An editorial’s introductory paragraph states: “With his know-how, Schrader could make the Pirates more popular and, in particular, more electable. He might be able use his understanding of economics to rid the party of its Internet-freak image”.

Directly after its Berlin election victory, the Pirate Party’s survey ratings rocketed—initially from 4 to 7 percent, then to 9 percent, and finally to 10 percent. By its own account, the party’s previously declining membership also rose to more than 15,000.

This increase is due in large part to the extremely positive reaction of the media and established political parties, who consider the Pirates useful in diverting mounting social discontent into innocuous or right-wing channels. Such was the conclusion also reached by that organ of the Swiss banks, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

Under the heading “Hardly a headwind for the German Pirates” and subtitled “Benefiting from kid gloves”, the paper said: “The success of the Pirates is augmented by the other parties’ extremely defensive handling of their new competitor. When they meet representatives of the Pirates in televised debates, they often dispense with the usual attacks on political opponents, showing instead respect for the concerns of the new grouping”. The media were also said to have reported “surprisingly positively on the party”.

The extreme heterogeneity of the Pirate Party currently makes it difficult to predict how it will evolve—into a kind of replacement for the FDP, a remake of the Green Party, or a short-lived populist protest party. What is certain, however, is that it will not play a progressive role in resolving the historical crisis of capitalism. Its mishmash of political naivete and unquestioning loyalty to the market economy make it a useful tool in the hands of the ruling elite.



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