

Abstract

Is blue the new red for workers? – Urgent questions in face of the rise of the German AfD *GLU conference theme “4 - Building Movements against Neoliberalism and Neonationalism”*

The growing support for the new nationalist party AfD (*Alternative for Germany*) is shaking German labour organizations, especially when it became evident that the electoral turnout in several state elections was highest amongst workers and also union members. “The rise of the AfD is something that shocks unions. It has not remained concealed from us that many of its voters are employed in our companies”, commented Christiane Benner, vice president of the IG Metall. When every fifth or even fourth unionist votes for a nationalist party, the AfD might be correctly exulting that “the new red for workers is blue”, referring to its political party colour. With the 2017 national elections in September, the right-wing party intends to establish itself as a permanent factor for at least the next four years. While abundant literature exists on the emergence and rise of the AfD (Friedrich 2015; Werner 2015), its positions (Häusler/Roeser 2015), or its support by different think tanks and companies (Kemper 2013) the specific implications for labour have been neglected so far. Drawing on the research of Dietl (forthcoming) on the social agenda of the AfD, this article will discuss some of the most urgent questions with regards to the rise of the AfD and labour:

First, whether its neoliberal agenda will be reconcilable with its more “social”, “anti-capitalist” rhetoric to attract an even broader electorate. For this purpose, the current official social policies of the AfD will be examined with regards to its market authoritarian elements versus its racist nationalist parts.

Secondly, whether the assumption can be held up that many workers who now support the AfD would be deterred if they knew more about its neoliberal policies which would mostly affect them negatively, if they came into being. Precisely, this tackles the question if simply more information is needed – or if there are workers who intentionally vote for the reincarnation of neoliberalism.

Thirdly, it seems indispensable to explore why so many union members are prone to vote for an “anti-immigration” party, the roll-back in gender equality, the cuts of minority rights, the delegitimization of “political correctness”, the bashing of the socially weak, the resistance to the inclusion of disabled people, to name but a few of the political goals of the AfD. While this can only be briefly touched, it is evident that past efforts by German unions for an open society have largely failed, so that strategies here need to be revisited. This article will thus conclude with some thoughts on how to revive an internationalist, social movement unionism.

The basis for these reflections were, among others, the first national program of the AfD that was adopted in May 2016 as well as the debates surrounding its social policy agenda; a meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative research on the voting patterns of unionists; the richest source, however, was the day-to-day communication with union members, both rank-and-file and functionaries, and countless debates in meetings, workshops, and conferences, on the topic, including an ongoing educational program for union members on the political program of the AfD offered by the authors. While this article only provides a snapshot of the available information, a more in-depth analysis and further findings will be laid out in Dietl (forthcoming).

Literature:

Dietl, S. forthcoming. *Die AfD und die soziale Frage - Zwischen Marktradikalismus und »völkischem Antikapitalismus«*. (Münster, Unrast Verlag).

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