

External bureau meeting 2016: The Left's experience in government and challenges ahead

The annual GUE/NGL external bureau meeting, on 17 and 18 November 2016 in the German federal state of Thuringia, saw MEPs debate lessons from the Left's experience in government and the rise of the far-right in Europe.

Panels on day one took place in the Landtag of Thuringia, in the city of Erfurt - the region's capital and largest city - with attendance from Minister-President **Bodo Ramelow** of DIE LINKE. GUE/NGL President **Gabi Zimmer** highlighted the significance of the chosen venue where, for the first time since Germany's reunification, the Left has taken governance, heading a Red-Red-Green coalition.

German MEP **Cornelia Ernst** opened the first panel of the day about the 'Left experience in government'. **Susanne Henning-Wellsow**, Chair of the parliamentary group and party chair of DIE LINKE in Thuringia, reflected upon the past 15 years which saw DIE LINKE rise from the margins to election success. During this period the party worked to break from isolation and gain the trust of the people. Their chosen candidate was equally someone who people could relate to. Even though DIE LINKE is in coalition with two parties with a more centrist orientation, it has remained true to its left-wing credentials.

The goal, according to Henning-Wellsow, should be long-term growth at a national level since it is in Berlin where major legislation is done. Nevertheless, the DIE LINKE-led government in Thuringia is working to improve in the areas they have influence with priority for a more egalitarian education system where every child has an opportunity to flourish. They have already succeeded by bringing in a new law that allows employees, for example, to take time off work for training and personal development as well as creating a fund to support dairy farmers. The DIE LINKE-led government is currently in negotiations to reform the regional constitution and a committee of inquiry was established in the Landtag to look into the causes of racism and xenophobia in the region.

Greek MEP **Dimitrios Papadimoulis** followed by talking about his own experience as a member of Syriza currently in government in Greece. He said that the Left has been told for decades that they are incompatible with power / governance and the expectations were for Syriza to fail within days of taking office. They were wrong but this thinking highlights the need to shift the discourse and prove that the Left has credible proposals for assuming office.

Syriza came to power during an economic crisis and at the onset of a refugee crisis. Meanwhile, there is a worrying resurgence of the far-right in the country. Nevertheless, Syriza has pushed through progressive reforms in the country by supporting the interests of the working-class. Syriza's success has also inspired other Left movements in Europe. Papadimoulis called for unity and for the Left in Europe to unite and support each other against efforts to isolate them.

Reflecting on AKEL's experience in government, Cypriot MEP **Neoklis Sylikiotis** stressed its achievements amongst them an upgrade of the public infrastructure, reforms in different sectors and an enhancement of workers' rights as well as the welfare state.

Despite the pressure from the TROIKA on Cyprus to agree on a memorandum and widespread austerity measures, AKEL's government resisted the imposition to accept privatisations, the dismantling of the pension system as well as the welfare state. Left parties must continue to battle for the benefit of the workers and the people, Sylikiotis concluded.

Speaking over video link, former Finnish Minister and current MEP **Merja Kyllönen** focused her message on the need for the Left to have a realistic plan when joining government or risk failing. Kyllönen was in government as part of a broad coalition and to avoid being held hostage by the bigger parties in the coalition, she fought for concessions early on. This resulted in victories to her party's credit that are still benefiting the Finnish people today such as the institution of a progressive system of taxation. Vasemmistoliitto, Kyllönen's party, did not support some majority decisions made by the coalition government and it said so publicly. She added that it was important for the party to remain true to itself even when in coalition. Consistent communications for a Left party is therefore crucial.

Minister President Bodo Ramelow of DIE LINKE echoed his colleagues on how unthinkable it was just a few years ago for the Left to be elected to government in Germany. The political basis of this transformation is expressed in the coalition agreement which laid out a vision for collaboration between parties on the Left. The result is that even today the parties in the coalition government work very closely with each other and have established a good rapport that enabled this government to be stable and succeed.

Ramelow's government was proactive in taking on the challenges of the region from streamlining the numerous energy providers and instituting an administrative reform to steps in education and increase in funding to expand public services. On the issue of refugee, Ramelow said that his government made sure that they had a proper welcome instead of allowing the far-right to have the spotlight with their fear mongering.

Integration of migrants/refugees

German MEP **Martina Michels** introduced the next panel discussion on the topic of integration of migrants/refugees. She argued for a coordinated approach in the response to the crisis and that the session will help better understand how this has worked in practice, especially in Germany, which received the bulk of refugees.

Christine Sommer and Anja Flaig, coordinators for the work of volunteers at the Ministry of Migration, Justice and Consumer Protection of Thuringia, talked about coordination efforts between different levels of government and civil society and the efforts made to identify needs and respond to them in a timely way. The Ministry not only worked with established organisations to provide support for the refugees but also with more informal actors such as neighbourhood groups. Integration is only possible with support from volunteers and the local community but the government has to provide the framework and the conditions for this to happen, according to Flaig.

GUE/NGL MEP **Connie Ernst** criticised the existing EU directives on refugees - recently revised in response to the crisis - which in many ways are unrealistic according to her. One example are the measures to prevent so-called secondary migration - flows between EU countries - whereby asylum seekers are required to stay in the first country they arrive and are refused services in other member states. This system does not work for people with family elsewhere.

Other similar shortcomings are the lack of protection for the vulnerable and the lack of guarantees that they won't be deported. Certain provisions in the directives can be exploited by member states as asylum seekers are required to provide documentation to prove their claim even if many have arrived with no documents.

Ernst spoke about her efforts at the European Parliament to push for a Europe-wide policy for integration. This is currently under the exclusive competence of member states which reflects on the weak response to the crisis by some member states. It is important to tap into

existing experiences of integration, like that of Germany, in order to develop standards and approaches that European governments can implement.

Additionally, there isn't enough support going to NGOs working to support refugee/migrant integration and many have been shut down as a result, depriving society of their valuable role at this crucial time. The current approach pushes countries to deal with the situation as an emergency and this encourages tent cities. What is needed instead is a renewal of the social contract where standards are assured for everyone, Ernst concluded.

Sabine Berninger, a member of DIE LINKE's parliamentary group, spoke about the work of the Education Ministry in providing integration courses to refugees and efforts to assimilate refugees in the local market, with funds allocated for guidance courses throughout the region. Focus has been on those with prospects of staying in Germany in the long-term, giving them the tools to make them adapt faster.

Tamara Thierbach, mayor of Erfurt on integration policy in Thuringia, gave a vivid testimony of the logistics involved in hosting refugees arriving almost overnight and the level of coordination involved. When a big number of refugees arrived on the 5th February 2015, the houses that were available to host them needed six weeks to be ready but no furniture was available at short notice. A school undergoing renovation was used instead as a reception centre. Hundreds of public servants worked overnight to ensure houses and communal centres were ready before the six weeks. There was an across-the-board consensus that Erfurt would not have tent cities.

The response to refugees also brought challenges, especially from the far-right but also questions from concerned citizens. Thierbach said that they had to address each situation and provide the counter-arguments necessary and the awareness-raising required to explain why they were doing this work.

Challenges for the Left in Spain and Portugal

The final session of the day saw two Spanish and two Portuguese MEPs present on the state of the Left in their respective countries.

First to present was **Tania González Peñas** who spoke about similarities and differences between Portugal and Spain, from a leftist perspective. The Spanish MEP spoke about the cycles of economic crisis both countries have been through after joining the EU. The countries had industrial models that were remnants of dictatorships. The entry into the EU made this model less sustainable and this led to an industrialisation crisis.

Even though the benefits of accession such as access to new markets and financial aid alleviated the impact, the structural issues in both economies became evident with the 2008 economic crisis which had been preceded by a decade of strong growth. The crisis showed the economy wasn't diverse and depended on a few key sectors.

Peñas criticised the austerity policies that came as a result, the precariousness and the growing inequality. Citizens are bearing the costs of years of bad government but they were not silenced. Across Spain the *indignados* movement took over public squares calling for better living conditions. In Portugal, the left-wing parties and trade unions achieved a new degree of prominence. Major corruption scandals were uncovered and people started to distrust centrist government which had led them to the crisis. The Left saw enormous electoral gains as a result.

Spanish MEP **Angela Vallina** spoke about more recent developments in Spain, namely the results of the last two elections and the deadlock that followed. Vallina argued that the Left needs to present itself to the people as the real alternative to the current failed system. The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) refused to form a new government with the Left and instead opened the way for the Right. People are realising that the parties that presented themselves as Left, were in fact defenders of right-wing policies and the status quo.

Vallina explained the current problems facing the working class and the difficulties in mobilising the masses to bring about change. One such obstacle is the corporate control over mass media which strives to shape public consciousness in a certain way. The education system also is in dire need of reform but the ruling parties are interested in keeping things as they are. Workers are struggling to make ends meet and rural areas are being depopulated. It is an overall depressing scenario and so it is important for people to know and to believe that alternatives exist. Many people see these policies - especially austerity which made the situation worse for them - as coming from the EU, eroding trust in the institution. It is difficult for people to see a light at the end of the tunnel under such conditions, lamented Vallina.

Portuguese MEP **João Ferreira** briefed the group on the situation in Portugal which has seen its debt rise and strategic sectors in the economy sold to foreign economic interests. Precariousness has become widespread, unemployment and inequality rose and salaries are low. Poverty levels are high and public services were slashed. This appalling situation is the outcome of the implementation of EU-IMF memorandum carried out by the right-wing government that sought to erode and pervert the gains of Portugal's progressive constitution from the 1974 revolution.

After the October 2015 elections and following a joint-position between PCP and the Socialist Party (PS) that paved way for the formation of a PS minority government, some of the so-called austerity began to roll back. The joint-position allowed the restitution of the rights taken by austerity such as return of holiday days that had been abolished, re-institution of subsidies for the vulnerable and increase in pensions. On the other hand, there are still structural elements, which the current government did not break from such as the EU impositions related to the euro and the Economic and Monetary Union, which Ferreira considered as part of the problem and not the solution.

Portuguese MEP **Marisa Matias** closed the session with an overview of the gains made in Portugal following the agreement her party, Bloco de Esquerda, also made with the Socialist Party to enable a minority government. She argued that while the agreement had limitations it brought clear social gains for the working class. She gave as examples new protections for vulnerable families to prevent housing takeovers, measures to support poor tenants, support to 1 million families living under energy poverty.

The Left parties also succeeded in suspending the process of privatisation of public transportation, forced the public bank to remain in government hands, among other measures that put a break to unfettered austerity and neoliberalism. Matias argued that there is clear public support, as polls show, for the agreement even if this solution was difficult to explain in the beginning. The limitations of the agreement however include differences with the government on how to deal with Portugal's mounting debt, positioning vis-a-vis the EU, allocations of the budget, among other policies. These differences however have not called into question the agreement itself.

The European Legacy of Buchenwald and today's struggle with the extreme right

The following day, GUE/NGL MEPs visited Buchenwald Memorial -site of the former Nazi concentration camp. The MEPs laid a wreath to honour those who perished in the camp. “Never Again” can Europe allow fascism to return to its soil. The visit to the museum was a reminder of the challenges ahead and the need to speak out in this crucial moment.

GUE/NGL MEP **Kateřina Konečná** opened the session that followed the visit. MEP **Dimitris Papadimoulis** spoke briefly about the need to fight for the protection of human rights, freedom and democracy, which are threatened by the far-right. Such parties are gaining ground in some European countries and in his own country, Greece, a fascist party is currently the third largest. The Left has a duty to take on this struggle and to find answers to the problems of unemployment, insecure living, precarious conditions and others. Papadimoulis urged contemplation and reflection on strategies and the historic duty the Left faces.

The main intervention came from Dr **Heinrich Best**, Professor at Friedrich-Schiller-Universitat Jena, who delivered the results of the study he conducted on far-right trends in Thuringia. The yearly survey started in the year 2000 spurred by an arson attack in Erfurt against a synagogue. The survey does not look at parties or group behaviour but on extremism as a mental state, using as criteria the existence of nationalist feelings, support for populisms, Nazism and dictatorships. Different researchers use different indicators, and as a result they come up with different results.

A graph showed how in 2015 a representative sample of 11 per cent of males and 14 per cent of females manifested extremist attitudes in Thuringia. In 2016, this number decreased slightly, which the speaker attributed to reductions in unemployment and improvement in social conditions. Other markers studied in the samples were right-wing extremism, ethnocentricity and neo-national socialist ideology. These attitudes are usually guided by fear, argued the Professor, with people worried about being on the side of losers in life, fear of losing their position in the social structure.

Katharina Koenig, DIE LINKE member of the Thuringian Landtag, gave a brief overview of group behaviour, as opposed to individuals, examined in the previous presentation. Neo-Nazi groups target youth, before they reach the age of 18, so to shape their ideas from an early age. Programmes like the “citizens’ initiative for the future of Germany” organise concerts, help people buy houses and provide social support as means of recruitment. Some of these organisations don’t identify as neo-Nazi organisations publicly. Parties like the AFD even steer away from neo-Nazi groups and describe themselves as a conservative-right but in effect their policies are leading to the extreme right.

GUE/NGL President **Gabi Zimmer** closed the external bureau meeting calling on fellow MEPs to present real arguments that are credible in the eyes of the people in order to convince them of the dangers of the far-right. It is important for the Left to be present and not allow for the far-right to steal the limelight. The German MEP also called for the Left to address its mistakes of the past and look towards the future presenting workable policy proposals.