SAHRA WAGENKNECHT

CONDITION OF GERMANY

Interview by Thomas Meaney & Joshua Rahtz

Germany's economy faces multiple converging crises, both structural and conjunctural. Soaring energy costs due to the war with Russia; a cost-of-living shock, with high inflation, high interest rates and falling real wages; austerity imposed by the constitutional debt brake, when American competitors are going for fiscal expansion; a green transition that will hit key sectors such as the auto industry, steel and chemicals; and the transformation of China, one of Germany's most important trading partners, into a competitor in sectors such as electric vehicles. Could you tell us first, which regions have been worst affected by the downturn?

There is a general crisis underway, the most severe for decades, with Germany in a worse situation than any other major economy. Hardest hit are the industrial regions, the backbone of the German model up till now—Greater Munich, Baden-Württemberg, the Rhine-Neckar, the Ruhr. During the pandemic, retail and services were the worst affected. But now our *Mittelstand* firms are under massive pressure. In 2022 and 2023, energy-intensive industrial firms suffered a 25 per cent decline in output. That's unprecedented. They are just starting to announce mass redundancies. These small and medium-sized family-owned firms—lots of them specialist engineering works or makers of machine-tools, auto parts, electrical equipment—are really important for Germany. They're mostly owner-managed or family-run, meaning they're not listed on the stock exchange and often have quite a rugged character. But they have their own sort of business culture, focused on the longer term, the next generation, rather than quarterly returns. They're embedded in their local communities, often doing business-to-business trading. They want to retain their workers,

instead of exploiting every loophole, like the big corporations—of which we have plenty, too.

It's the *Mittelstand* firms that are really suffering in the current crisis. With continuing high energy prices, there is a real danger that manufacturing jobs will be destroyed on a large scale. And when industry goes, everything goes—decently paid jobs, purchasing power, community cohesion. You only need to look at the North of England—or the deindustrialization of the eastern *Länder*. The fact that we have this solid industrial base means that we still have a relatively high number of well-paid jobs. But *Mittelstand* firms have been under pressure for a long time. Mainstream politicians like to sing their praises, because they are very popular in Germany—it's quite an achievement to have retained these small, high-skilled family companies against the pressures of corporate buyouts and globalization. Helped in part by the cheap euro and low-price Russian gas, some of them became so-called hidden champions and world-market leaders. But German governments, prodded by global capital, have been tightening the conditions under which they operate. This was part of the neoliberal turn under Gerhard Schröder's red–green coalition at the turn of the millennium. Schröder abolished the old model of local banks holding large blocks of shares in local companies; that had at least had the advantage that most of the shares weren't freely traded, so there was no shareholder-value pressure from financial groups or hedge funds to maximize returns. Schröder also granted a profit-tax exemption, to tempt the banks to sell their industrial shares—if he hadn't done that, the model probably wouldn't have broken.

I don't want to idealize the *Mittelstand*. There are family-run companies that exploit their employees quite harshly. But it's still a different culture to that of the listed companies with international, predominantly institutional, investors, who are only interested in chasing double-digit returns. To let the *Mittelstand* be destroyed would be a real political mistake, because many aspects of the economic crisis have their roots in bad political decisions—decisions like the war with Russia, like the way the green transition is being handled, like the antagonistic stance towards China, all of which clearly go against Germany's economic interests. Schröder was *der Genosse der Bosse*—the comrade of the bosses, as we used to call him—but at least he looked at the situation and understood the importance of ensuring the flow of affordable pipeline gas. The current government has switched to high-priced American liquefied

natural gas for purely political reasons. All three parties in the governing coalition—the SPD, FPD and Greens—have plummeted in the polls because people are fed up with the way the country is being governed.

If we could look at those political decisions, one by one. First, the enormous rise in German energy costs is a direct outcome of the war in Ukraine. In your view, could the Russian invasion have been averted? It's commonly said that it was driven by revanchist Great Russian nationalism, which could only be stopped by force of arms.

My impression is that Washington never really tried to stop the Russian invasion, other than by military means. With Ukraine moving fast towards EU and NATO membership, it must have been clear that some sort of agreed security regime was needed as reassurance for the national-security interests of the Russian state. But the US ended all arms-control treaties and confidence-building measures in 2020, and in the winter of 2021–22 the Biden Administration declined to talk to Russia about the future status of Ukraine. You don't need 'revanchist Great Russian nationalism' to explain why Russia thought it could no longer look on as Ukraine was turned into a major base for NATO.

Germany is under a lot of pressure from the US to reduce its economic ties with China. How do you see that relationship?

The situation is a bit more ambiguous than with Russia. The fact that China is becoming a competitor is not Germany's fault, that's clear. But if we were to cut ourselves off from the Chinese market, in addition to cutting ourselves off from cheap energy, then the lights would really go out in Germany. That's why there is a certain amount of pressure, even among large companies, not to adopt an isolationist strategy. As a percentage of GDP, we export far more to China than the US does, so our economy depends on it much more. But the Greens have been fanatical on this point, so completely in thrall to the US that they have adopted a virulently anti-China position. Baerbock, the Green Foreign Minister, has made real diplomatic blunders. In at least one instance, in Saarland, she scared off an important Chinese investment with a lot of jobs attached. So, this is a worrying new development. The Chinese own a lot of companies in Germany, which are often doing better than those taken over by American hedge funds. As a rule, the Chinese are planning for long-term investments, not the kind of quarterly thinking

that characterizes many American financial companies. Of course they want to extract a profit, and the technologies are not selfless either; but they also provide secure jobs.

This is very important for our economy. I don't think Scholz has decided yet quite how to position himself. The FDP is also manoeuvring, under strong pressure from German business. They are having a parallel debate about Russia's frozen currency reserves, and if they expropriate them, or even just the income from them, it will send an unmistakable signal to China to avoid reserves in euros, if possible. Some are already being exchanged for gold. The US is not expropriating Russian reserves, for good reason. So again, it's only the Europeans who are making fools of themselves. We are ruining our economic prospects so that the Chinese can—because they are actually aiming to—become more and more self-sufficient anyway. They still need trade, but perhaps in twenty years they will need it less than we need them.

According to Robert Habeck, the Economy Minister and former co-leader of the Greens, Germany's biggest economic challenge is a shortage of workers, both skilled and unskilled—with some 700,000 vacancies unfilled. Given its ageing society, the government estimates the country will be short of 7 million workers by 2035. If the health of German capitalism is a priority for the BSW,[1] your new party, doesn't that require a significant level of immigration?

The German education system is in a miserable state. The number of young adults without school-leaving qualifications has been rising continuously since 2015. In 2022, 2.86 million people between the ages of 20 and 34 did not have a formal qualification, including many people with a migratory background. This corresponds to nearly a fifth of all people in this age group. More than 50,000 students leave school in Germany every year without a diploma—with dramatic consequences for themselves and society. For them, the debate about a lack of skilled workers sounds like a mockery. Our priority is to get these people into vocational training.

Nevertheless there is a need for some immigration, given the demographic situation in Germany. But it must be managed, so that the

[1] Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht: für Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance: for Reason and Justice].

interests of all sides are considered—the countries of origin, the population of the receiving country and the immigrants themselves. This needs preparation; there is none of that right now. We don't think a neoliberal immigration regime, where everybody can in effect go anywhere and then must somehow try to fit in and survive, is a good idea. We need to welcome people who want to work and live in our country and we should learn to do so. But this shouldn't result in disrupting the lives of those who already live here, and it shouldn't overstrain collective resources, for which people have worked and paid taxes. Otherwise, the rise of nativist right-wing politics will be inevitable. In fact, the AfD in its present form is largely a legacy of Angela Merkel. In Germany we have a dramatic housing shortage, especially for people with low incomes, and the quality of education in public schools has become appalling in places. Our capacity to give immigrants a chance of equal participation in our economy and society is not endless. We also think it is a lot better if people can find education and employment in their home countries, and we should feel obliged to help them in this, not least with better access to investment capital and an equitable trade regime, rather than absorbing some of the most enterprising and talented young people from those countries into our economy to fill our demographic gaps. We should also reimburse countries of origin for the educational costs of highly skilled workers moving to Germany, like doctors. And we should address the human-trafficking side of immigration, the gangs who make millions by helping people into Europe who don't really need asylum.

Many who might be sympathetic to the BSW are concerned that statements like your comment last November about the migration policy summit in Berlin—'Germany is overwhelmed, Germany has no more room'—contribute to a xenophobic atmosphere. Isn't it important to be clear about avoiding any suggestion of racism or xenophobia when discussing what a fair migration policy might be?

Racism must always be combated, not just avoided, but combated. But to point to real social shortages—demand outstripping capacity—is not xenophobic. These are just facts. For instance, there is a housing shortage of 700,000 units in Germany. There are tens of thousands of teaching jobs unfilled. Of course the sudden arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers fleeing wars—a million in 2015, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan; a million from Ukraine in 2022—produces a huge surge in demand, which is not met by any rise in capacity. That creates

intense competition for scarce resources, and that does fuel xenophobia. That's not fair for the new arrivals, but it is also not fair for the German families who need affordable housing, or whose children go to schools where the teachers are completely overwhelmed because half the class don't speak German. And this is always in the poorer residential areas, where people are already under stress.

It doesn't help to deny or gloss over these problems. That's what the other parties tried to do, and in the end, it simply strengthened the AfD. Migration will always take place in an open world, and often it can be enriching for both sides. But it's essential that the scale of it doesn't get out of hand and that sudden surges of migration are kept in check.

You say that racism must be combated, but when the BSW *European Parliament manifesto declares that in France and Germany there are 'Islamist-influenced parallel societies' in which 'children grow up hating Western culture', that sounds like sheer demonization. Yet at the same time, the leadership and parliamentary representation of the* BSW *is undoubtedly the most multicultural by background of any German party. How would you respond to that?*

There are such places in Germany, not as many as in Sweden or France, but they are noticeable. If you consider people only as factors of production, and society just as an economy defended by a police force, this need not bother you a lot. We want to avoid a spiral of mutual distrust and hostility. Those in our group with what you call a 'multicultural background' know both sides and have a vital interest in a society in which all people can live together in peace, free from exploitation. They know first-hand the hollowness of neoliberal immigration policies—'open borders' is exactly that—when it comes to delivering on promises. And the women in our group in particular are happy to live in a country that has by and large overcome patriarchy and they don't want to see it being reintroduced through the backdoor.

You cited green-transition policies as going against Germany's economic interests. What did you have in mind?

The Greens' approach to environmental policy is economically punishing for most people. They are in favour of high CO_2 prices, making fossil fuels more expensive in order to create an incentive to get off them. That may work for well-to-do people who can afford to buy

an electric car, but if you don't have much money, it just means you're worse off. The Greens radiate arrogance towards poorer people and are therefore hated by a large part of the population. That's something the AfD plays on—it thrives on hatred of the Greens, or rather of the policies the Greens pursue. People don't like being told by politicians what to eat, how to talk, how to think. And the Greens are proto-typical of this missionary attitude in pushing their pseudo-progressive agenda. Sure, if you can afford an electric car, you should drive one. But you shouldn't believe that you're a better person than someone who drives an old diesel mid-range car because they can't afford anything else. These days, Green voters tend to be very well off—the most 'economically satisfied', surveys show, even more so than FDP voters. They embody a sense of self-satisfaction, even as they drive up the cost of living for people who are struggling to get by: 'We are the virtuous ones, because we can afford to buy organic food. We can afford a cargo bike. We can afford to install a heat pump. We can afford it all.'

You're critical of the Greens' approach, but what environmental policies would you pursue?

Policies that the broad majority of people in our country can live with, economically and socially. We need extensive public provision for the immediate consequences of climate change, from city planning to forestry, from agriculture to public transport. This will be expensive. We prefer public expenditures for the mitigation of climate change over, for example, increasing our so-called 'defence' budget to 3 per cent of GDP or more. We can't pay for everything at once. We need peace with our neighbours so we can declare war on 'global warming'. Destroying the domestic car industry by making electric cars obligatory just to meet some arbitrary emissions standards is not what we support. Nobody now alive will live to see average temperatures going down again, regardless of how much we reduce carbon emissions. First equip homes for the elderly and hospitals and childcare centres with air conditioning at public expense, and make places close to rivers and streams safe against flooding. Make sure that the costs of pursuing ambitious emissions-reduction deadlines are not imposed on ordinary people who already have a hard time making ends meet.

Germany is also roiled at present by a cultural crisis over Israel's slaughter of over 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza. You are one of the few politicians to have

challenged the German ban on criticisms of Israel and to have spoken out against Germany supplying the Netanyahu government with arms, alongside the US and UK. Does the current pro-Zionist cultural offensive represent popular opinion in Germany?

Well, there is of course a different historical background in Germany, so it's understandable and right that we have a different relationship to Israel than other countries. You cannot forget that Germany was the perpetrator of the Holocaust—you must not ever forget that fact. But that doesn't justify supplying weapons for the terrible war crimes that are now taking place in the Gaza Strip. And if you look at the opinion polls, the majority of the population doesn't support this. Media coverage is always selective, of course, but even so it's obvious that people can't leave, that they're being brutally bombed. People are starving, disease is rampant, the hospitals are under attack and desperately ill-equipped. All this is evident, and on the ground in Germany there are definitely very critical positions. But in politics, anyone who voices criticisms is immediately bludgeoned with the club of antisemitism. The same applies in social and cultural discourse, as with the open Berlinale awards ceremony: the moment you criticize the actions of the Israeli government—and of course many Jews criticize them—you are painted as an antisemite. And that is naturally intimidating, because who wants to be an antisemite?

In October 2021, many thought an SPD-led government would represent a turn to the left, after sixteen years of Merkel's chancellorship. Instead, Germany has lurched to the right. The 'traffic light coalition' has raised the defence budget by €100 billion. German foreign policy has taken an aggressively Atlanticist turn. Did Scholz's Zeitenwende come as a surprise to you? And what role have the SPD's coalition partners played in pushing it onto this course?

The tendencies have been there for some time. The SPD led Germany into the war against Yugoslavia in 1999, then into the military occupation of Afghanistan in 2001. Schröder did at least oppose the Americans on the invasion of Iraq, with strong support from within the SPD. But the SPD has completely lost its old personality and has now become a kind of war party. What is frightening is that there is so little opposition within the party. Its current leaders are figures who really have no position of their own at all. They could be in the CDU–CSU, they could be with the Liberals. That's why the SPD's public image has largely been

destroyed. There is nothing authentic about it anymore. It no longer stands for social justice—on the contrary, the country has become increasingly unjust, the social divide has grown, and there are more and more people who are really poor, or at risk of poverty. And it has entirely abandoned its policy of *détente*. Of course, the SPD is also being driven in this direction by the Greens and the FDP. The Greens are now the most hawkish party in Germany—a remarkable development for a grouping that arose out of the great peace demonstrations of the 1980s. Today they are the biggest militarists of all, always pushing for arms exports and increased defence spending. And this just reinforces the trend within the SPD.

The build-up against Russia has been driven by this dynamic. At the beginning, it seemed that Scholz was giving in to pressure on some issues, but not on others. For example, he set up a special fund for Ukraine, but was wary of being drawn into the conflict and initially delivered only 5,000 helmets. But then this changed and a pattern emerged. Scholz hesitates at first. Then he is attacked by Friedrich Merz, leader of the CDU–CSU opposition. Then his coalition partners, the Greens and the FDP, pile on the pressure. Finally, Scholz makes a speech announcing that another red line has been crossed. The debate moved on to armoured personnel carriers, then battle tanks, then fighter jets. Scholz always said '*Nein*' at first, then the no turned into a '*Jein*', a 'no-yes', and then at some point into a '*Ja*'.

Now it has got to the point where NATO countries and Ukraine are pushing for Germany to supply Taurus cruise missiles, which can attack targets as far away as Moscow. They represent the most dangerous escalation to date, because they are clearly for offensive use against Russian targets. I'm not sure whether Germany delivering them is actually in America's interests, because the risk is extremely high. If we supply German weapons to destroy Russian targets like the Kerch Bridge between Crimea and the mainland, then Russia will react against Germany. I hope this means they won't be supplied. But you can't be sure, given Scholz's spinelessness and tendency to fold. It's hard to think of a chancellor who has had such a miserable record. The whole coalition, as well—there has never been a government in Germany that was so lifeless, after just two and a half years in power. And of course, the CDU–CSU is not an alternative. Merz is even worse on the question of war and peace, and worse

on economic questions, too. The right has no strategy, but it will be the main beneficiary of the government's dismal record.

Perhaps the wiretap of Luftwaffe chiefs discussing whether German boots on the ground would be needed for the Taurus missiles—and revealing that British and French troops were already active in Ukraine, firing Storm Shadow and Scalp missiles—will have put that on hold for now. But isn't Merz's strategy to tack right, to draw in AfD voters? Hasn't he been quite successful in that?

Merz simply doesn't have a credible position on most questions. The AfD has won support on three issues: first, migration—that is, the number of asylum seekers in Germany; second, the lockdowns during the pandemic; and third, the war in Ukraine. Merz is all over the place on asylum seekers. Sometimes he goes all AfD and rants about little pashas, then he gets attacked and takes it all back again. But of course this was Merkel's legacy, so the CDU is not credible in that respect. The same with the Covid crisis: the CDU–CSU was also in favour of lockdowns and compulsory vaccination, and acted just as badly as everyone else. Then the peace question came up, and that is what is so perfidious in Germany. Before we launched the BSW, the AfD was the only party that consistently argued for a negotiated solution and against arms deliveries to Ukraine, which was a vital issue for many voters in the east. The CDU–CSU wanted to supply even more weapons and Die Linke was divided on the issue. If you wanted a return to a policy of *détente*, if you wanted negotiations, if you didn't want to be a party to the war by supplying arms, you had no one else to turn to. On Israel, of course, the AfD is determined to supply even more weapons, because it is an anti-Islamic party and obviously approves of the terrible things happening there. This was one of the main reasons why we ultimately took the step of founding a new party, so that people who were legitimately dissatisfied with the mainstream, but who are not right-wing extremists—and that includes a large share of AfD voters—would have a serious party to turn to.

So how would you compare the current CDU to Helmut Kohl's party? It was he who trampled on the Grundgesetz in order to integrate the new Länder.

The CDU under Kohl always had a strong social wing, a strong labour wing. That was what Norbert Blüm stood for, and Heiner Geißler, in his early days. They argued in favour of social rights and social security,

which made the CDU something like a people's party. It always had strong support from workers, from the so-called *kleinen Leute*—ordinary people—on low incomes. Merz stands for BlackRock capitalism, not just because he used to work for BlackRock, but because he represents that viewpoint in terms of political economy. He wants to raise the retirement age, which means a new pension cut. He wants to reduce social benefits; he says the welfare state is too big, it has to be dismantled. He's against a higher minimum wage—all the things the CDU used to support. This was part of the Catholic social doctrine, which had a place in the CDU. They stood for a domesticated capitalism, for an economic order that had a strong social component, a strong welfare state. And they were credible, because the real assault on social rights in Germany took place in 2004 under Schröder and the SPD–Green government. So, it's a bit different from the UK. The CDU actually delayed the neoliberal onslaught. Merz is a breakthrough for them.

Could you explain why you decided to leave Die Linke, after so many years?

The main thing was that Die Linke itself had changed. It now wants to be greener than the Greens and copies their model. Identity politics predominates and social issues have been pushed to one side. Die Linke used to be quite successful—in 2009, it got 12 per cent, over 5 million votes—but by 2021 the vote had fallen below the 5 per cent bar, with only 2.2 million votes. Those privileged discourses, if I may call them that, are popular in metropolitan academic circles, but they're not popular with the ordinary people who used to vote left. You drive them away. Die Linke used to have a strong foothold in eastern Germany, but people there can't deal with those debates about diversity, at least in the language in which they're cast; they're simply alienating to voters who want decent pensions, decent wages and, of course, equal rights. We are in favour of everyone being able to live and love as they wish. But there is an exaggerated type of identity politics where you have to apologize if you speak out on a topic if you don't have a migration background yourself, or you have to apologize because you're straight. Die Linke has become immersed in that kind of discourse and has lost votes as a result. Some have moved to the non-voter camp and some to the right.

We no longer had a majority in the party because the milieu that supported Die Linke had changed. It was clear that it could not be saved. A group of us said to ourselves, either we continue to watch the party

go under, or we'll have to do something. It's important that those who are dissatisfied have somewhere to go. A lot of people were saying, we no longer know who to vote for, we don't want to vote for the AfD, but we can't vote for anyone else either. That was the motivation for saying, let's do something on our own and start a new party. Not all of us come from the left; we are a bit more than a left revival, so to speak. We've also incorporated other traditions to some extent. I described this in my book, *Die Selbstgerechten,* as 'conservative-left'.[2] In other words: socially and politically, we are on the left, but in social-cultural terms, we want to meet people where they are—not proselytize to them about things they reject.

What lessons, negative or positive, did you learn from the experience of Aufstehen, the movement you launched in 2018?

Aufstehen achieved an overwhelming response when it was founded, with well over 170,000 interested people. The expectations were huge. My biggest mistake back then was that I didn't prepare for it properly. I was under the illusion that the structures would form once we got started; as soon as there were plenty of people, it would all start to work. But it soon became clear that the structures needed for a functioning movement—in the *Länder*, the cities, the municipalities—can't be set up overnight. It takes time and care. That was an important lesson for the development of the BSW: no single person can found a party, it needs good organizers, people with experience and a reliable team.

The BSW is being launched by an impressive group of parliamentarians. What expertise do they have—what are their specialisms and particular areas of engagement?

The BSW group in the Bundestag has a strong staff. Klaus Ernst, the deputy chair, is an experienced trade unionist from IG–Metall, a co-founder and chair of the WASG and later of Die Linke. Alexander Ulrich is another trade unionist, also an experienced party politician. Amira Mohamed Ali, who chaired Die Linke's parliamentary group, worked as a lawyer for a large firm before becoming active in politics. Sevim

[2] Sahra Wagenknecht, *Die Selbstgerechten. Mein Gegenprogramm—für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt* [*The Self-Righteous: My Counter-Programme—for Community Spirit and Cohesion*], Frankfurt 2021.

Dağdelen is an experienced foreign-policy expert with an extensive network—in Germany and worldwide. Other BSW parliamentarians are Christian Leye, Jessica Tatti, Żaklin Nastić, Ali Al Dailami and Andrej Hunko. There are important figures outside the Bundestag as well.

What is the BSW's programme?

Our founding document has four key planks. The first is a policy of economic common sense. That sounds hazy, but it addresses the situation in Germany where government policies are destroying our industrial economy. And if industry is destroyed, that is also a bad situation for employees and the welfare state. So: a sensible energy policy, a sensible industrial policy, that is the first priority.

Does this mean a labour-based alternative economic strategy, such as the British left around Tony Benn developed in the 1970s, or is it conceived as a conventional national-industrial policy?

In Germany, there was never the same consciousness of a working-class identity as there was in Britain in the 1970s and 80s, during the miners' strike, even if it no longer exists today. The Federal Republic was always more of a middle-class society, in which workers tended to see themselves as part of the middle class. What matters in Germany is the *Mittelstand*, the strong block of smaller firms that can position themselves against the big corporations. That opposition is as important as the polarity between capital and labour. You have to take it seriously in Germany. If you appeal to people purely on a class basis, you won't get a response. But if you appeal to them as part of the wealth-creating sector of society, including owner-run companies, in contrast to the giant corporations—whose profits are funnelled to the shareholders and top executives, with almost nothing to the workers—that does hit home. People can understand what you're saying, they can identify with it and mobilize on that basis to defend themselves. You don't find the same opposition within small firms, because they're often struggling themselves. They don't have the leeway to raise wages, given that low prices are dictated to them by the big players. But I know that Germany is somewhat different in this respect, compared to France, Britain or other countries. So, a common-sense energy policy and industrial policy would start by considering the *Mittelstand*'s needs, in a way that encourages owners and their families to hang on rather than sell their companies to some financial investor.

That would mark a distinction with the tacit grounding of government policy over the last twenty years, at least, where—despite all the glowing talk about the Mittelstand—Merkel's strategy was clearly oriented to the big corporations and, with a bit of environmentalism, to the big cities. The same goes of course for the FDP and, in practice, for the Greens. So, for you, the most important boundary is the difference between financial capital and regional or mid-tier capital?

Yes, but as I said, I don't want to idealize that either. There's certainly exploitation at all levels. But still, there's a difference compared to Amazon, say, or some of the DAX companies. Today, for example, even though the economy is shrinking, the DAX companies are paying out more dividends than ever. In some cases, companies are distributing their entire annual profits, or even more. For years now, Germany has had a very low investment ratio, because a lot of money is paid out, due to the pressure of global financial groups. As a proportion, *Mittelstand* companies invest significantly more.

What are the other planks in the BSW's programme?

The second plank is social justice. This is absolutely central for us. Even when the economy was doing well, we still had a growing low-wage sector, with rising poverty and social inequality. A strong welfare state is vital. The German health service is under tremendous strain. You can wait months before you even get to see a specialist. The nursing staff are terribly overworked and underpaid—we strongly supported their strike in 2021. The school system is also failing. As I've said, a considerable proportion of young people leaving *Realschule* or *Hauptschule* don't have the basic elementary knowledge to be taken on as apprentices or trainees. And German infrastructure is falling into disrepair. There are some three thousand dilapidated bridges, which aren't being repaired and will have to be demolished at some point. Deutsche Bahn, the rail service, is permanently unpunctual. Public administration has outdated equipment. The mainstream politicians are well aware of all this but they do nothing about it.

The third plank is peace. We oppose the militarization of German foreign policy, with conflicts escalating towards war. Our goal is a new European security order, which should include Russia in the longer term. Peace and security in Europe cannot be guaranteed in a stable

and lasting way unless conflict with Russia, a nuclear power, is off the table. We also argue that Europe should not allow itself to be drawn into any conflict between the USA and China, but should pursue its own interests through varied trade and energy partnerships. On Ukraine, we call for a ceasefire and peace negotiations. The war is a bloody proxy conflict between the US and Russia. To date, there have been no serious efforts by the West to end it through negotiation. The opportunities which did exist have been thrown away. As a result, Ukraine's negotiating position has deteriorated significantly. However this war ends, it will leave Europe with a wounded, impoverished and depopulated country in its midst. But at least the present human suffering can be brought to an end.

And the fourth plank?

The fourth plank is freedom of expression. There is increasingly heavy pressure here to conform within a narrowing spectrum of permissible opinion. We've spoken about Gaza, but the issue goes far beyond that. The SPD Interior Minister, Nancy Faeser, has just submitted a 'Democracy Promotion' bill which would make mockery of the government a criminal offence. We are opposing this, naturally, on democratic grounds. The Federal Republic has an ugly tradition here, which is always sprouting new flowers. One doesn't need to go back to the repression of the 1970s, the attempt to ban 'left-wing extremists' from public-sector jobs. There was an immediate resort to ideological coercion during the pandemic, and even more so now with Ukraine and Gaza. So, those are the four main planks. Our general goal is to catalyse a fresh political start and ensure that discontent does not carry on drifting to the right, as it has done in recent years.

What are the BSW's electoral plans for the upcoming European Parliament and Länder elections? What coalitions will you consider in the Land parliaments?

As to coalitions, let's not share the bear's fur before it is killed, as we say. We are sufficiently distinct from all other parties to be able to consider any proposal they might want to make on coalitions, or other forms of participation in government like toleration or flexible majorities. For the time being we just want to convince as many of our fellow citizens as possible that their interests are in good hands with us. As a new party, we do want a strong showing in the European elections, our first

opportunity to seek support for our new approach to politics. We will put it to the voters that the EU's democratic member states should be principally responsible for dealing with the problems of Europe's societies and economies, rather than the Brussels bureaucracy and juristocracy.

On your self-definition as 'conservative-left': you've spoken warmly of the old CDU tradition, its social doctrine and 'domesticated capitalism'. How would you differentiate the BSW from the CDU of old—if allied, say, to the foreign policy of Willy Brandt?

Post-war Christian Democracy was conservative in the sense that it was not neoliberal. The old CDU–CSU combined a conservative as well as a radical-liberal element; that it could do so was due to the political imagination of a man like Konrad Adenauer—although something like it existed also in Italy and, to an extent, France. Conservatism at the time meant protection of society from the maelstrom of capitalist progress, as opposed to adjusting society to the needs of capitalism, as in neoliberal (pseudo-)conservatism. From the viewpoint of society, neoliberalism is revolutionary, not conservative. Today the CDU, now led by someone like Merz, has successfully rooted out the old Christian-Democratic insight that the economy should serve society, not vice versa. Social democracy, the SPD of old, also had a conservative element, with the working class rather than society as a whole at the centre. This ended when the Third Way in the UK and Schröder in Germany turned the labour market and the economy over to a globalist-technocratic marketocracy. Just as in foreign policy, we believe we are entitled to consider ourselves the legitimate heirs of both the 'domesticated capitalism' of post-war conservatism and the social-democratic progressivism, domestic as well as foreign, of the era of Brandt, Kreisky and Palme, applied to the changed political circumstances of our time.

Internationally, what forces in the EU—or beyond—do you see as potential allies for the BSW?

I'm not the best person to ask about this, as my focus is really on domestic politics. I know that people often have a distorted view of us from abroad, and I hope I don't see other countries in a distorted way. In the early days, we had close links with La France insoumise, but I don't know how they've developed in recent years. Then there was the Five-Star Movement in Italy, which is a bit different again, but there are certain

overlaps there too. In general, we would be on the same wavelength as any left-wing party that was strongly oriented towards social justice but not caught up in identitarian discourse.

You say that Die Linke have become 'greener than the Greens', in marginalizing social issues. But the Greens themselves once had a strong social programme, with a green industrial strategy that had a powerful social component and, of course, the demilitarization of Europe. In your view, what happened in the 1990s, when they lost that dimension?

It was the same with many former left-wing parties. Part of the answer is that the supporting milieu has changed. Left-wing parties were traditionally anchored in the working class, even if they were led by intellectuals. But their electorate has changed. Piketty traces this in great detail in *Capital and Ideology*. A new, university-educated, professional class has expanded massively over the last thirty years, relatively unscathed by neoliberalism because it has a good income and rising asset wealth, and doesn't necessarily depend upon the welfare state. Young people who have grown up inside this milieu have never known social fear or hardship, because they were protected from the outset. This is now the main milieu of the Greens, people who are relatively well off, who are concerned about the climate—which speaks in their favour—but who aim to solve the problem through individual consumer decisions. People who have never had to go without, preaching renunciation to those for whom going without is part of everyday life.

But isn't this the case for the mainstream parties, too? The Greens most dramatically, perhaps, compared to what they were in the 1980s. But the CDU*, as you say, has abandoned its social component. The* SPD *led the neoliberal turn. Is there a deeper cause of this movement to the right, or towards financial or global capital?*

First, as sociologists like Andreas Reckwitz have analysed very well, we are dealing here with a strong and growing social milieu, one that plays a leading role in shaping public opinion. It's predominant in the media, in politics, in the big cities where opinions are formed. These are not the owners of big companies—that's a different layer. But it's a powerful influence and it shapes the players in all political parties. Here in Berlin, all the politicians move within this milieu—the CDU, the SPD—and it makes a strong impression on them. The so-called little people, those in

small towns and villages, without university degrees, have less and less real access to politics. The parties used to be broad-based, genuine people's parties—the CDU through the churches, the SPD through the trade unions. That's all gone now. The parties are much smaller and their candidates are recruited from a narrower base, usually the university-educated middle class. Often their experience is limited to the lecture hall, the think tank, the plenary chamber. They become deputies without ever having experienced the world beyond professional political life.

With the BSW, we're trying to bring in political newcomers who have worked in other fields, in many other areas of society, in order to break out of this milieu as far as we can. But the old model of the people's party has gone, because the base for it no longer exists.

May we ask you, finally, about your own political and personal formation. What do you consider the most important influences on your world outlook—experiential, intellectual?

I've read a lot throughout my life and there have been epiphanies, when I've gone on to think in a new direction. I studied Goethe in depth and that was when I began to think about politics and society, about human coexistence and possible futures. Rosa Luxemburg has always been an important figure for me, her letters, in particular; I could identify with her. Thomas Mann, of course, certainly influenced and impressed me. When I was young, the writer and playwright Peter Hacks was an important intellectual interlocutor. Marx used to be a major influence on me and I still find his analyses of capitalist crises and property relations very useful. I'm not in favour of total nationalization or central planning, but I'm interested in exploring third options, between private property and state ownership—foundations or stewardships, for example, that prevent a firm from being plundered by shareholders; points I discussed in *Prosperity without Greed*.

Another formative experience has been interacting with people at the events we organize. It was a conscious decision to go out into the country, to do lots of meetings and take every opportunity to talk to people, to get a sense of what moves them, how they think and why they think that way. It's so important not just to move around inside a bubble, only seeing the people one already knows. That has shaped my politics and perhaps changed me a bit. I do believe that as a politician, you shouldn't

think you understand everything better than the voters. There is always a correspondence between interests and outlooks—not one-to-one, but often, if you think about it, you can understand why people say the things they do.

How would you describe your political trajectory since the 1990s?

I've been in politics for a good three decades now. I've held key positions in the PDS and Die Linke. I've been a member of the Bundestag since 2009 and was co-chair of Die Linke's parliamentary group from 2015 to 2019. But I would say that I've remained true to the goals for which I entered politics in the first place. We need a different economic system that puts people at the centre, not profit. Living conditions today can be humiliating; it's not uncommon for old people to be rummaging through garbage cans looking for returnable bottles to make ends meet. I don't want to ignore such things, I want to change their underlying conditions for the better. I'm on the road a lot, and wherever I go, I sense there are many people who no longer feel represented by any of the parties. There is a huge political void. That leads to people getting angry—it's not good for a democracy. It's time to build something new and make a serious political intervention. I don't want to have to say to myself at some point: there was a window of opportunity when you could have changed things and you didn't. We're founding our new party so that the current policies, which are dividing our country and risking its future, can be overcome—along with the incompetence and arrogance of the Berlin bubble.