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An Interview With Jutta Ditfurth

Jutta Ditfurth, a founder of the West German Greens in Hesse, is presently one of the three speakers of the West German Green party. She is a noted standard bearer for "die Linke," the anticapitalist Left (formerly known as the "fundis"). This interview with Ditfurth was conducted on July 31, 1988.

Green Perspectives: Jutta, could you give us a description of the situation in the German Green movement as of the end of July 1988?

Jutta Ditfurth: The most exciting news that I can report is the Perspectives Conference. The Greens hold them periodically to discuss what their views are on various issues. The latest Perspectives Conference was held between June 17 and 19 of this year in Bad Godesberg, near Bonn.

GP: How many people attended?

Ditfurth: At one single session, the largest number, I would estimate, was about 1,200.

GP: Were they mainly Greens or does that also include the general public?

Ditfurth: The great majority, practically all of them, were active Greens. In my opinion they came from across the whole political spectrum of the German Green party. It was a very impressive conference - people packed the town hall. Many of the sessions were held on a green where people could enjoy the weather, although they were inside tents, so there was a very festive atmosphere during much of the conference.

GP: How was the conference organized?

Ditfurth: It was organized in relatively few sessions, so that in some there were only a small number, thirty or fifty. In other sessions, those dealing with particularly important issues, there were often six hundred and sometimes as many as a thousand.

GP: Do you mean workshops?

Ditfurth: No, not workshops the way you have in the United States. We had people, say four or five, representing all different tendencies in the Greens. They sat at a table next to each other, and each was given the opportunity to present his or her point of view on the issues that were raised. Afterward the floor was thrown open to everyone in attendance. People freely discussed issues from the floor, addressing the audience as well as the speakers. There were lively discussions that included almost every point of view represented by the individuals sitting along the tables.

GP: What were some of the issues that were taken up?

Ditfurth: Every major issue that involves the Green movement was discussed in at least one or another of these sessions. We took up the nature of the state in Germany, nuclear energy, biotechnology, women's rights and issues, the relationship of the Green Party to NATO, peace issues, and of course a large number of environmental issues. Of course we also took up some of the basic conflicts over coalitions with the Social Democratic Party or with other movements in Germany.

GP: What were some of the statements made in the particularly important sessions?

Ditfurth: What impressed me a great deal at one of the sessions was the view of some Greens toward West Germany's membership in NATO. At one of the sessions Joschka Fisher presented the realo position - he 's the realo leader in the Hesse Landtag who was the environmental minister in the Hesse Green-Social Democrat coalition until last year. He said that the Greens should not withdraw from NATO - a point of view that has caused a great deal of controversy among Greens in West Gennany. Joschka stated not only that should West Germany not withdraw from NATO but that it's very important that we remain in NATO. This represents a very marked swing of the realos toward the right, although that has been going on for some time.

GP: What other statements impressed you as very important?

Ditfurth: Another very important issue was the attitude of the Greens toward the State. In their recent four-point program, the realos have finally said something that we on the Left have been accusing them of believing for years, and that is that they want to work within the present system entirely. They have come out in favor of functioning not only within the State, according to a policy of "radical reformism," but as part of the social order itself. They are committed to the existence of capitalism; in fact, they call for "ecocapitalism." This is completely reformist and completely, in a sense, conformist, so that I can find very little distinction any longer between them and the Social Democrats. Another issue that was raised at the Perspectives Conference has been troubling the Green movement enormously over the past months, and that is the right of married men to rape their wives. As leftists inside the party, we have adamantly opposed rape under the veneer of marriage and have supported women in their attempts to prevent their husbands from taking possession of their bodies against their will. A recent party congress called for a minimum two-year sentence for men who commit marital rape. But the realos hedged on this question and asked for only a one year maximum sentence. As you know Germany has a very strong patriarchal history behind it, and the women's movement has had the greatest difficulty trying to counteract it. It disturbed me enormously to find that the realos are not prepared to confront this patriarchalism directly face to face but rather took a very soft position at the conference, closer to that of conventional opinion than I could have believed.

GP: Does that mean that realos believe married men have the right to rape their wives?

Ditfurth: No, the question, didn't take precisely that form. It's rather that they seemed very soft on the issue, didn't seem to want to press it, and that caused a very considerable uproar among Greens. In fact this is one of the hottest issues that exists, and it has led to a great amount of public response.

Still another issue was the question of nuclear power. As you know, we demand the closing of nuclear power plants in West Germany. Again, the realos took a much more hesitant position. They called for phasing out nuclear power rather than an immediate shutdown. Some individual realos seemed to be very equivocal about the elimination of nuclear power in West Germany generally.

Let me give you another example of how far to the right the realos have moved. They publish a periodical called *Realo Manifest*—

GP: You mean literally *RealoManifest*? Is that the German word?

Ditfurth: Yes, and there they publish many of their statements on various issues, including issues that have divided those of us on the Left from them. And one statement that they made was really incredible! I hope I have it exactly right: "To withdraw from NATO reflects the opinion of a very special type of German who is not interested in the security of the world." That was more or less the sense of it. Isn't that absolutely incredible?

GP: Who wrote that line?

Ditfurth: There was no particular signature under it. It was more or less a general statement of the realo position so far as NATO is concerned.

My speech at the conference was one of the harshest attacks on the realo positions from NATO to nuclear power. When I was finished, to my utter surprise the audience broke out in an ovation of applause. I was simply overwhelmed by the support shown by this very sizable audience in the town hall, at least a thousand people.

And I think this set the tone for the rest of the Perspectives Conference. From that point onward, the positions of the Greens in the conference sessions pretty generally were in support of the views presented by the left wing of the party. So that one could say that this was an almost triumphant meeting from the stand point of the positions that I and others have been holding for years in the Greens.

And let me state a conclusion from my experience over those three days. Having attended many of the workshops, particularly the ones that dealt with the really crucial issues that distinguish the Left from the realos, and having heard reports from others who attended the sessions at which I could not be present, I have to make a statement that is a very decisive conclusion. I would say now that the Greens in West Germany are far more radical than at any time in their history. I believe I can say with real understanding and experience that I have never seen the party move this far to the left. It was absolutely an astonishing experience for me and for all the friends who have been working with me in our long struggle over the past years.

GP: You're prepared to say that in all the years you've been in the party and as one of the founders of the party, that the Greens are now more radical than they've ever been in the past?

Ditfurth: Absolutely, that is my opinion. Everything I saw at this conference and all my experiences in recent weeks indicate to me that the Greens generally, the membership by and large that is politically active and politically

concerned, has moved far more to the left, has become far more radical than at any time since the inception of the Greens.

And I say this contrary to what is being reported today in the press. The press in Germany is trying in every way to indicate that the realo-fundi struggle is still going on, that it is tearing the party apart, that the Greens are still engaged in this incestuous fight and that, if anything, the realos are the ones who are winning most of the struggles. I can easily understand that this impression would exist in places outside West Germany as a result of this kind of reportage. Let me state categorically that all this information is grossly misleading and indeed that it is outright false. The Greens are in my view now the most radical movement, at least in the political arena, in West Germany today.

GP: What proportion of the representatives in the Bundestag and in various other parts of the organization are realo and what proportion are Left?

Ditfurth: In the Bundestag, the majority of the Green deputies are realo; also in the state legislatures. But they have various resources at their disposal, and they leave the impression that the party as a whole is more realo than it actually is. Of course, at the grassroots level there are people who are politically undeveloped and confused, and some leave the party; others enter the party without a clear idea of what the issues are. But I can say that the basic core of the party, the most politically concerned individuals in it, have never been more radical than they are at the present time, at least while they have been in the Green party.

GP: What is the proportion of realos to leftists among the German Greens at various levels of party organization and in the various parts of the country?

Ditfurth: Of the 44 or so Green Bundestag members, I would estimate that approximately 20 to 24 are realos and approximately 10 to 12 are Leftists. The remainder move in between, and by "remainder" I mean some of the realos and occasionally even some of the people on the Left. So that the Bundestag Green fraction is largely realo, although not entirely so by any means. In the worst of cases about two thirds of the Green Bundestag members are realos.

GP: What about the party congresses?

Ditfurth: There I would say that the drift is mainly toward the Left, and sometimes very emphatically so. For example, the executive committee of the party today is composed of 8 leftists and 3 realos, which means that the leftists in the party have the overwhelming majority on the executive committee of the party. And generally at the party congresses, certainly at the latest one, we on the Left have had support on most of the basic issues.

GP: Doesn't that bring the party into conflict with the Green Bundestag representatives?

Ditfurth: Oh yes, it very definitely does, and there are often very serious differences between what the congresses want and what the realo fraction in the Bundestag actually tries to support. So that the realos in the Bundestag, functioning to a great extent on their own, often act independently of what the congresses at various conferences want.

To give you an idea of the mood of the party itself, at the last congress a young man, perhaps no more than twenty, took the microphone and declared with great emphasis, "The Greens are a left-wing party!" He received a huge ovation from the delegates, which I found to be utterly inspiring.

GP: I wonder if you could tell us the position of the Greens in West Germany today. What is their place in the political culture, and what kind of support do they have?

Ditfurth: If you asked me on the basis of what we know from opinion polls and the like, I would say that the Greens are able to gather between 8 and 9 percent of the electorate. That is of course speaking only about federal and state elections. There hasn't been any basic change as far as those figures are concerned.

A major problem we run into is the rumors and the scandals the realos spread. The realos continually act very much on their own, and they have spread all kinds of ugly stories about financial mismanagement by the Left in the party that have absolutely no foundation in fact. Their behavior in this respect is from my point of view very, very reprehensible. And that is a big problem we have today for us – the fact that so many reports are exaggerations if they're even true at all and in many cases are simply fabrications. We have to counter the rumors fed by the realos to the press, but this consumes a great deal of our time and attention. And it's painful to us because we're very anxious to work at the grassroots level – the various social movements that exist outside the parliamentary structure, not simply within the framework of the Bundestag and the various Landtags.

The rank and file of the Green party are often very much opposed to the way in which the realo representatives in the Bundestag behave. For example, quite recently about 400 people, mainly Greens from all different levels of the party including the Executive Committee but also some people from the social movements around or outside the party, wrote up a major protest and placed it in a full-page ad in one of the leading newspapers. It vigorously protested the behavior of the realo Bundestag members on the question of marital rape. It said the Bundestag realos had not taken a vigorous

enough position on this question. In some cases leading party figures have made outright disclaimers that the realos in the Bundestag even represent the Greens.

To the best of my recollection, this was the first time such a sizable and influential group of people, Greens for the most part, openly voiced opposition to the realo representatives the Bundestag. The event was quite unprecedented and reveals the extent of the growing alienation that many in the party feel first of all from the realos in the Bundestag, and then from the realos generally.

You must realize the amount of attention this protest by 400 people in and around the Greens with considerable influence and a very high reputation-received. This statement took up a full page in one of West Germany's leading newspapers and created quite a furor.

GP: What do you think will be the future of the Green party in West Germany and also of the various tendencies inside the party?

Ditfurth: I believe that the realos are giving themselves another year – possibly a little longer than that but not much longer – to actually change the party around. If they don't succeed, it's my suspicion that many of them may enter the SPD. This is least the story I hear from people of various tendencies inside the Green party around the country. You must understand what many realo leaders believe, and this has been a steady development toward a very distinct and very final position. They believe that one has to accommodate oneself to the capitalist system and work within the system, and as I pointed out they have used words like "ecocapitalism" to designate their viewpoint. Joschka Fischer says he wants to make an SPD out of the Green party.

GP: How do you think the Germans are going to vote with respect to the Greens?

Ditfurth: I think the party is going to become more and more radical, and I believe that it will pose serious alternatives to the German people. The realos up to now have often made this very difficult, first by their voting record in the Bundestag and second by the extent to which they very frequently stand between the party and the extraparliamentary social movements. It has been very difficult at times for the Green party to establish the kind of connections with grassroots movements that could easily be established because of the record of the realos and the extent to which they make the party seem much more conservative than it actually is.

GP: Then why do you think the party will move to the left? What are the social bases for this development of the party toward the left?

Ditfurth: I think things are becoming polarized in Germany. We are beginning to see a much more radical formation developing in West Germany on the one side—the Greens – as well as a right wing that is much more authoritarian. And people are now being increasingly confronted with choices between a very radical movement and a very conservative movement.

I'll give you a striking example of the extent to which radicalization is beginning to take place in Germany. Quite recently, a steel plant in Reinhausen in Nordrhein-Westphalia was going to be closed down. This led to a genuine uproar in the community. In November of last year the workers went out on strike against the wishes of the SPD and their own trade union. The struggle went on for months and was marked by extreme militancy. What is very important is not only that the workers engaged in unauthorized strike action, but also that they got support from the entire community, especially from the women in the community. This went on for about half a year and became increasingly heightened, reflecting more and more the irritation and the anger that are beginning to appear among workers as well as among more middle-class people or professionals.

Let me also point out that there is a tremendous radicalization going on among young people in West Germany. Young people are becoming more and more radical, and there is a potential for a growing youth movement that could also move very sharply to the left. Women are becoming more active politically than they have been in the past, with the result that we are beginning to see a new sense of militancy among young women as well as among young men. I am talking also about young workers, and perhaps even in the case of Reinhausen, workers generally who are developing a new sense of defiance to the established trade union leadership, and to the Social Democrats.

GP: In what areas do you think the Greens are losing strength, and in what areas are they gaining strength?

Ditfurth: It's hard to say right now – the situation is very fluid in West Germany, and things are changing quite rapidly. It's hard to predict how the Greens will do in the elections in the immediate future. I can only repeat that the polls indicate that the Greens have approximately 8 or 9 percent of the electorate.

GP: Is there reason to believe that there will be a growth?

Ditfurth: If there is greater polarization in West Germany, the Greens may well and become a very radical and left organization.

But a big problem at the moment is that of rotation. Next year, virtually all the speakers who are leftists in varying degrees are going to have to rotate, or give up their offices in the party. The same is true for the leadership of the Bundestag Greens; they too are supposed to rotate, although the Left Greens are the only ones there who do rotate these days. The problem we face is in finding new people who will really reflect the sentiment of the party, not that of the party structure. So we are confronted with the need to develop and educate new people who will replace us in the various executive bodies of the Greens.