

## The Marxist Who Saw the Fall of the German Left

The postwar German left has had a lot of ups and downs — and leading Marxist political scientist Frank Deppe was there for most of them. On his 80th birthday, he spoke to *Jacobin* about the need to root left-wing politics in the changed realities of the modern working class.



Frank Deppe (right) and Wolfgang Abendroth address a student meeting at the University of Marburg in the early 1970s. (Courtesy of Witich Rossmann)

Frank Deppe is one of the most important Marxist intellectuals in Germany today. As a college student, he served on the national leadership of the Socialist German Student League (SDS), which was expelled from the Social Democracy Party (SPD) in 1961 and was subsequently an important figure in the [1968 movement](#).

In the decades that followed, he distinguished himself as the author of numerous Marxist studies of European integration, trade union strategy, and intellectual history, such as a five-volume history of twentieth-century political thought, or his groundbreaking study of [Machiavelli's \*The Prince\*](#). Since retiring from the University of Marburg in 2006, he has remained active as a member of [Die Linke](#) and on the editorial boards of two of Germany's most important Marxist journals, [Z. Zeitschrift Marxistische Erneuerung](#) and [Sozialismus](#).

Deppe began his academic career in 1961 as a student at the University of Frankfurt, before moving to the University of Marburg three years later. Here, he received an intellectual socialization in the so-called “Marburg School,” a group of left-wing

political scientists and sociologists around professor and antifascist resistance fighter [Wolfgang Abendroth](#), who taught at the University of Marburg until 1972 — when Deppe took over his department chair. The students of Abendroth, and later of Deppe, developed an intellectual approach to Marxism that always sought to build and maintain ties with the organizations of the workers' movement. For the Marburg School, it was clear that critical scholarship was never an end in itself. Rather, it had to be directed toward developing a better understanding of social conflicts and thereby helping to inform socialist strategy.

Marking his eightieth birthday this week, Frank Deppe looks back on a long and storied career as a partisan intellectual of Germany's socialist movement. He spoke with Janis Ehling for *Jacobin* about his time in the student movement, the decline of the twentieth-century left, and the future of socialism.

Janis Ehling

You grew up in the conservative culture of postwar West Germany. How did you find your way to the political left in that kind of atmosphere?

Frank Deppe

I grew up in a petit-bourgeois family in Frankfurt. My father worked as a teller at a savings bank, and my mother was a housewife. Until the early 1960s, I had nothing whatsoever to do with the Left or the workers' movement. Like many others in my generation, I only began to think critically during my university studies, while confronting recent German history and the role our parents and state institutions played in it. I also belonged to one of the first cohorts drafted into the newly formed West German Army, but I decided to refuse military service and participate in the peace movement's "Easter marches" against German rearmament instead. Beyond that, I had played trumpet in jazz bands around Frankfurt since I was fifteen years old. At the time I started university, I was in a band with three black GIs. There, I of course also witnessed the problem of racism. Especially among the older generation, this "black music" was met with harsh rejection.

Janis Ehling

[Max Horkheimer](#) and Theodor W. Adorno both taught sociology in Frankfurt at that time. Did you decide to study under them on purpose?

Frank Deppe

No, I decided to study sociology without knowing what exactly was taught at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Nor did I know who Horkheimer and Adorno were. A fellow musician once said to me, "Oh yes, Adorno, that's the Sartre of Frankfurt." That sounded appealing.

However, I soon moved from Frankfurt to Marburg. The reason was quite simple: I

wanted to get away from home and lead a freer life. I had also decided to study the Frankfurt School's philosophical foundations more closely. During my first semesters, I was not even aware that the critical theory represented by Horkheimer and Adorno didn't have anything to do with the workers' movement anymore. That was also because I didn't really know what the workers' movement was. I had only noticed it at the Easter marches, where I saw older men wearing Basque-style berets, and someone told me that they were Communists. You have to remember that the Communist Party [KPD] had been illegal in West Germany since 1956.

Moreover, the trial of the former SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann took place in Jerusalem in 1961. I can still remember drunks in Frankfurt growling, "Freedom for Berlin and Adolf Eichmann!" That shocked me quite a bit, and further contributed to my politicization. Then, in Marburg, I joined SDS. The group was very small, and an older comrade asked me if I wanted to take over the chair after only one semester. That's how I became chair of the Marburg branch of SDS.

Janis Ehling

Besides Frankfurt, Marburg was the only West German city where Marxist professors taught at the university. What was your experience there?

Frank Deppe

I became an assistant at the Institute for Political Science in Marburg, where Wolfgang Abendroth taught. Abendroth had himself been a member of the Communist movement in the Weimar Republic — after 1928 of the [Communist Party \(Opposition\) or KPO](#), a "right-wing" split from the KPD. Its hallmark was its critique of the ultra-left policies of the [Communist International](#) and the KPD during this period, which essentially placed Social Democracy and fascism on the same level. "The various left-wing currents in the workers' movement must find points of interaction and collaboration."

The [defeat of the German workers' movement in 1933](#) was a formative experience for an entire generation, to which Abendroth belonged. He had been a resistance fighter and worked as a Marxist professor after the war. He retained his commitment to the unity of the workers' movement — and thus also taught us to practice this unity, which meant reaching out to the Communists. It was anything but harmless to maintain such contacts at that time given the ban on the KPD. Anti-communism had practically become state ideology.

If someone were to ask me today who my "fathers" were, I would say Wolfgang Abendroth and the trade unionist Willi Bleicher. In the novel *Naked Among Wolves* by Bruno Apitz, a group of prisoners in the Buchenwald concentration camp hides a Jewish boy and thus saves him from certain death. Bleicher was one of those prisoners. In the 1960s, he was district secretary of IG Metall in Stuttgart and in several strikes faced off against Hanns Martin Schleyer, the former SS officer who was then on the board of directors at Daimler-Benz and later became president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations.

In the Marburg SDS chapter, almost all of us were also members of the Working Group for Trade Union Questions. Many of us also began to get involved in trade union educational work early on. This connection between the workers' movement and academia in the Marburg School had a strong influence on me.

Janis Ehling

What defined the Marburg School?

Frank Deppe

In my opinion, two points: First, as a political scientist and constitutional scholar, Abendroth was intensively concerned with the role of the state and the significance of the constitution as a field of struggle between different classes. This balance of forces within the state must be repeatedly analyzed and reanalyzed.

The second point concerns the role of intellectuals in capitalist class society. The academics of the Marburg School not only studied Marx's classical critique of political economy, but also understood Marxism as an analysis of society that must always be renewed in accordance with the times. This stood in contrast to the Frankfurt School, where they believed that the kind of systematic analysis of society on the basis of *Capital* was no longer possible.

Abendroth's message was that left-wing intellectuals who have the opportunity to study Marxism within the academic institutions of bourgeois society must connect with the left wing of the actually existing workers' movement and join its struggles. At that time, when the Left in West Germany was at its lowest point, the task was to establish contacts through social movements, such as the mobilization against the Emergency Acts. That is just as true today: the various left-wing currents in the workers' movement must find points of interaction and collaboration.

Janis Ehling

These days, the 1968 movement, of which SDS was a major force in West Germany, is accused of having caused the Left to turn away from the working class. [Thomas Piketty](#) speaks of a "Brahminization" of the Left, and [Sahra Wagenknecht](#) blames the '68ers for the Left's academicization. How do you see it?

Frank Deppe

There's both right and wrong in that. The 1968 movement did indeed mark an important turning point for the history of socialism in the developed capitalist societies — but 1968 was not a turn away from the working class in such a sweeping way. When SDS was expelled from the SPD in 1961, it was supported both financially as well as practically by left-wing trade unionists from IG Metall to IG Chemie and other unions.

There was also a left wing of the West German trade unions that was represented in the SPD, but was critical of the party's development after it abandoned its self-image

as class party with the [Godesberg Program](#) in 1959. These links between the trade unions and SDS remained very close for a long time.

The mainstream radical left around Rudi Dutschke in 1968 argued that the industrial working class in the developed capitalist countries could no longer be regarded as a relevant force in the struggle against capitalism. Yet an international wave of class struggles began around the same time in [France](#), [Italy](#) and Britain, among other countries, along with major strike movements in Spain and Portugal that eliminated the fascist regimes that had ruled there for decades. These huge upheavals confirmed that a shift in the balance of forces toward democracy and socialism is not even conceivable without strong movements of the working class.

That was why people like [Joschka Fischer](#), who later became foreign minister, went to Opel to work on the assembly line. In addition, there was a radical left-wing grassroots movement active in the antinuclear movement, among other things. This gave rise to the [Green Party](#) in the late 1970s, which then quickly grew into a party of the system. Many radical leaders from back then have since become apologists for the prevailing order.

Janis Ehling

Nevertheless, a few left-wing radicals turning their backs on socialism doesn't mean the end of the organized working class. How do you explain the [historic weakness of Social Democracy](#) today?

Frank Deppe

The decline of the Communist and socialist mass parties is only very indirectly related to 1968. Enormous structural changes took place after but even before that, leading to globalized financial market capitalism. The social and class structure changed. The industrial working class shrank, while wage labor in the service sector increased. In addition, there was an explosion in the number of university students around the world during this period. This “education revolution” led to the emergence of a wage-earning scientific and technical intelligentsia as a new segment of the middle class. The industrial proletariat, the Old Left's traditional social base, was the big loser in this transformation.

This structural transformation of class society is one reason for the weakness of Social Democracy in Germany — the other is that the SPD has become a party of the state. The state is a different framework for political action. Transforming society as a whole disappears from the political horizon. Right-wing Social Democrats then speak of the “center,” from which the existing society has to be kept running or optimized. But this perspective increasingly ignores the experiences of working people, the ones who suffer the most from the crises and catastrophes that society generates through the way it functions.

Janis Ehling



Do you think the SPD can recover from its current low?

Frank Deppe

The SPD will not succeed in making a mark on the population by governing in alliance with the ruling classes. If it continues down this path, it will only continue to lose support. It can only renew itself if it makes a turnaround, as has been attempted in recent years by the Labour Party in Great Britain and by the Democrats in the United States. However, the SPD lacks the high-profile personalities one could trust to do this, such as [Jeremy Corbyn](#) or [Bernie Sanders](#).

“The SPD will not succeed in making a mark on the population by governing in alliance with the ruling classes.”

The election of left-wing outsiders [Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans](#) as new party co-chairs showed that there is certainly potential for this among the party base, but they were immediately hemmed in from above. [SPD youth leader] Kevin Kühnert probably won't make it happen, either. At the end of the day, the Young Socialists are always roped back into the party's power structures very quickly. The constraints of a governing party are too strong. The question is whether a different dynamic will break out when the big defeat comes.

Janis Ehling

Why hasn't Die Linke benefitted from the SPD's decline?

Frank Deppe

Despite isolated upswings, the Left in the developed Western countries is characterized by structural weakness. The decline of the classical workers' movement, like the collapse of actually existing socialism, continues to have an enormous long-term effect. In this respect, the [establishment of a socialist party to the left of the SPD](#) is a remarkable historical achievement, even by European standards. In other countries, the German left is seen as a very significant force.

Nevertheless, there are great contradictions within Die Linke. It emerged from a unique fusion of Eastern leftists, trade union forces, and a split from the SPD, the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice [WASG] — and these different lines of tradition continue as lines of division within the party. In the East, it elects mayors; in the West, it's mostly a party of radical opposition.

Janis Ehling

And these aren't the only lines of division. You already said a few years ago that the base of the Left today is made up of the classical working class, precarious academics, and declassed elements living in the suburbs.

Frank Deppe

All the revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the joint work of

working people and the “subaltern popular classes,” as Antonio Gramsci put it. By that he meant peasants, small farmers, artisans — later on, intellectuals also joined. “The task of the Left is to bring together the old industrial working class, the growing number of precariously employed people, and this new academic working class.” The composition of this bloc changes over time. Today, the scientific-technical intelligentsia with academic training employed in wage-labor is of particular importance. This group’s political outlook tends to be liberal and ecological, but it increasingly understands what it means to be wage-dependent and to work in conditions oriented toward generating profit.

The task of the Left is to bring together the old industrial working class, the growing number of precariously employed people, and this new academic working class. That is the art of politics: uniting the many, sometimes competing, particular interests into one bloc.

Janis Ehling

What does the Left have to do now to regain strength and not disappear into irrelevance?

Frank Deppe

Socialism is never really gone. Class antagonisms, exploitation, oppression, and heteronomy are always present under capitalism. This gives rise to disputes that often appear as marginal conflicts but which are basically class struggles. In these struggles, forces emerge that see themselves as socialist and understand that transforming property and distribution relations is the solution to the enormous contradictions produced by the ruling order.

We constantly experience new crises these days, be it the pandemic or the consequences of climate change. This continuously creates new arenas of struggle in which the fundamental questions of politics arise — not only as questions of survival, but also as questions of class. I am convinced that the Left must grow stronger in these conflicts.

Janis Ehling

As a comrade with a great deal of experience, what advice would you give to members of the younger generation?

Frank Deppe

I would tell them that they should heighten their awareness of contradictions in their own surroundings — whether at work or at university. They should grasp every opportunity to learn more about the interconnections within the major crisis processes inherent in capitalism, and they must stake out a clear position on the political level, from participating in social movements to voting for Die Linke. Ultimately, it is only in this way that we can transcend this system.

