

The Energiewende - the Result of a Powerful Mass Movement from Below

An Interview with Josef Goepfel

By Paul Hockenos

Fifteen years ago, processes were set in motion that would turn Germany's energy market on its head. The main catalysts: liberalization of the energy market and passage of the Renewable Energy Resources Act. Since then, Germany's energy market has been transformed from one in which four giant utilities companies and several dozen small municipal power companies ruled the roost, to today when Germany's decentralized energy production includes around 3.5 million mostly small and medium-sized energy producers. Nowhere is the economic impact of this metamorphosis more evident than in Bavaria where land owners and farmers have taken advantage of the new space and incentives to become "prosumers," above all with photovoltaic and bio-energy, but also of late with wind power, too.

Josef Goepfel, 62 years old, is a German parliamentarian from central Franconia in Bavaria and a member of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavaria-based sister party of Angela Merkel's ruling Christian Democrats (CDU). He was the first in his traditionally arch-conservative party to grasp the relevance of the *Energiewende*, or clean energy transition, for his constituents and party. "This happened as the result of a powerful mass movement from below," he told Berlin-based journalist Paul Hockenos. Goepfel is one of Germany's staunchest proponents of renewables, and as such is often at odds with his CSU colleagues and even with the Merkel government. Hockenos spoke with him in his Bundestag office in Berlin.

Q: Mr. Goepfel, you're known in Germany for your strong support of the Energiewende and renewable energies. Are you alone in your party?

A: I was at one time, but not anymore. The Energiewende initiated a broad shift in thinking in the CSU. This happened as the result of a powerful mass movement from below that demanded it. In southern Germany, Bavarians and others jumped on the possibilities posed by renewable energy production. You hardly see a single house these days without at least one solar panel on the roof.

Q: Well, this shift in perspective seems to have impacted some in the CSU more than others. Most of the party is not of your opinion...

A: We have to keep in mind that Germany's previous energy production regime, namely one dominated by big, centralized power plants, evolved over 60 years. And in the minds of some politicians, this ossified to the extent that they can't imagine an alternative to it. But with the expansion of renewables, we've now got a completely different form of electricity production, one dominated not by big power plants but by much smaller, decentralized energy production. This is difficult for some people to accept, still, which is why there are still differences of opinion on the matter in the CSU and other parties, too. Over the decades, a certain mentality has set in that big is reliable and good. It's difficult to convince them that energy production that is dominated by small, diverse producers is also reliable.

Q: Is this why on energy matters the position paper from the CSU's most recent party congress in Wildbad Kreuth earlier this year looked much like the ones before it?

A: If you mean by that that the guiding principles of our energy plank – reliability, cost effectiveness, and environment-friendly – haven't changed, then you're right. But behind this, things really are changing. In the old days, our power system was much like television programming of the day: There were a handful of major channels and you watched what they gave you. Now, the energy market is more like the Internet: you can choose from many different offers, get and provide feedback, and more. This is the way energy is going, too. And, as I said, some are still in the process of grasping this fundamental transformation. But there's no going back to the TV programming of the past anymore.

Q: As for your constituents in central Franconia, are their interests limited to photovoltaic energy production?

A: This is where they began but now there's also biogas production and ever more wind turbines. My constituency is among those with the most biogas production units per inhabitant in Germany. The reason that so many Germans are interested in pursuing renewable energy is a simple one: It is the desire for independence from big companies. They put up solar panels in order to win this independence. This is the most important thing, not simply profit. This will to be independent is a strong motif in conservative thinking, and above all among farmers in rural areas. In political terms, German political conservatism is being underpinned with a new idea. So it's the case that in some constituencies, the voters

have a completely different attitude to clean energy than that of their elected representatives.

Q: It seems to me that the Energiewende is currently experiencing a backlash. Negative media about prices and grids and other issues dominates, not good news, although there is plenty of reason to cheer, too. Do you see it this way?

A: Yes, this is the case. But the most recent attempt by the opponents of the Energiewende to turn it back was the last of its kind that will be possible during this administration. This attempt failed and next year there's going to be a different coalition in office in Germany. And then politically there's going to be a definitive breakthrough for the Energiewende.

Q: But why this backlash? In the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, when Chancellor Merkel declared the Energiewende, there was a feeling of pride and optimism around the transition. Then, about a year ago, the mood changed, at least as it was being reported in the German media. How to you explain this shift?

A: Because the old power companies that used to dominate the markets understood that their very livelihood was at stake. In the press just the other day, there was an interview with the director of a municipal utility in northern Germany who said that "in ten years, E.ON [a major German power company with extensive holdings in fossil and nuclear fuels] won't exist anymore." This fear on the part of the old energy regime is behind this campaign. But it was unsuccessful and the Energiewende is going forward in 2013. You can see it by the new turbines that are being installed across the country. And just a week ago, on April 18, a new record was set: on a workday more than 50 percent of the entire country's electricity was generated by wind and solar power! That's a signal.

Q: The Merkel government's positions on Energiewende-related issues puzzle me. Sometimes, it is solidly pro-Energiewende, other times against, and very often it's even divided within itself, take the recent effort to bolster the EU Emissions Trading Mechanism. Environment Minister Peter Altmaier was for it, Economy Minister Philipp Roesler against. In the end, the center-right MEPs voted down modifications that would finally make it effective. All Merkel had to do was pick up the telephone and call them; they'd have done her bidding. But she didn't and now a key piece of the puzzle remains missing.

A: I was deeply disappointed by Ms. Merkel's passive stance on this matter. Nevertheless, I'm certain that Ms. Merkel, who is a physicist, understands the technical essence of the Energiewende and that it can't be turned back. This is why it was the chancellor herself who stopped the recent attempt by her own ministers to undermine the Energiewende.

Q: Let's look beyond the autumn vote this year, since it is unlikely that much is going to happen on the policy level between then and now. What will the priorities be?

A: Most important is a new legislative framework for the energy market. We have to reorganize the market around the small-scale energy producers. This means that the small producers will have to make it their task to supply a reliable service. Here's an example from

my district: the solar panels that supply energy during the day and more during the summer are supplemented by wind turbines that generate power at night and more during the winter. Then we have the biogas plants, which have to be configured so that they will fill in when both sun and wind are low. The producers have to get used to providing a reliable supply at regular times. Only then will they get a good price for their energy. We're already moving toward that goal right now. The consumers can have contracts with, for example, solar plants in their neighborhoods or virtually over the internet or even produce it themselves. But then the rest that they need they have to buy at a high price. This means that the electricity prices will fluctuate quite a bit. They'll be a baseload supply from renewables. But, say in February in the night, when there's nothing from wind and solar, then it may be that I'll have to pay 40 or 50 cents a kilowatt. This will then also inspire new innovation, like in storage capacity, to find a cheaper way of bridging the low-load hours of wind and PV.

There's going to have to be a new mentality among energy consumers, too. Energy has to be managed. This requires more individual responsibility. House owners too are going to have to look into ways to better manage their demand. Energy is going to be an issue which ordinary citizens are going to have to engage with, in a way no society has ever had to before. In terms of environmental protection, this is very welcome.

Q: You mentioned the need for back-up capacity to fill in when sun and wind are low. Would you consider subsidies or even a feed-in tariff for the likes of gas plants, which are currently doing this job but finding it very hard to make ends meet in light of their limited hours of production?

A: When we have a new energy market based on renewables, then gas works aren't going to need their own special laws. Rather, in the few hours that they generate electricity, they'll get such a high price that it will make it worthwhile for them. That's the free market! I tell my adversaries: I'm the one who's for the real free market on this issue. You with your old mentality are stuck in planned-economy thinking.

Q: What about these bigger projects like offshore wind power or Desertec, will they contribute significantly to Germany's Energiewende?

A: The essence of renewable energy is small-scale production dispersed across the entire country. Bavaria is striving to produce a full 50 percent of its own energy in the near future. The other half we want to buy from northern and eastern Germany. As for Desertec, I think it's going to take a long time to get up and running. In underdeveloped places like Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia, first we have to help them build up renewable energy production in order to win the trust of the people there. It would be a fatal mistake for us to produce electricity for our factories when there's 50 percent joblessness there. That won't work.

Q: Last question, is a Christian Democrat-Green coalition a possibility in autumn?

A: Yes.

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