

Intensive campaigning begins in German national election

Peter Schwarz
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Five weeks before election day, September 27, the so-called "hot phase" of the national election campaign in Germany has begun. Last weekend the current chancellor, Helmut Kohl of the CDU (Christian Democrats), and his challenger Gerhard Schroeder of the SPD (Social Democrats) spoke to thousands of party members at large meetings in Dortmund, Berlin, Munich and Bonn.

It is generally accepted that the elections this year will constitute a turning point in the political development of Germany.

Following 16 years and four terms in office, chancellor Kohl is assumed to have only a very small chance of being re-elected to a fifth term. In the opinion polls the SPD, with a total of 42 percent, has led the CDU by 4 or 5 percent for several months. Even in his own party more and more leading members are turning away from Kohl, although because of the coming election no one is prepared to actually stab him in the back.

Nevertheless, the election is by no means decided. If the opinion polls are to be believed, every second voter is undecided. In addition, the German proportional system--which in contrast to the British majority system divides parliamentary seats according to the number of votes recorded nationally--does not favour clear majorities. Since 1961 no party has been able to rule in Germany without forming a coalition.

Much will therefore depend upon the results of the smaller parties, which must win at least 5 percent of the votes to enter the German parliament (the Bundestag). The FDP (Liberal Democrats), at present a coalition partner of the CDU and since 1969 a party which has always shared power, could fall before this hurdle. The Greens, who are determined to enter a coalition with the SPD, stand at only the 6 percent mark according to the polls.

Should the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the successor organisation to the old East German ruling

party, or an extreme right-wing party enter the Bundestag, it is possible that neither a coalition of the CDU and FDP nor a coalition of the SPD and Greens would have an absolute majority. In that case it is likely that the SPD would join the CDU in a grand coalition. Already leading politicians of both parties favour such a solution.

In the east of the country the PDS stands to win up to 20 percent of the votes, but it has barely any support in the west, where the majority of voters live. The party can, however--and this is what happened four years ago--enter the Bundestag if it wins an overall majority in at least three electoral districts.

According to the polls, at the present time the extreme right, which is split into a whole number of different parties, has no chance of winning a mandate. Surprises, however, cannot be excluded. In the spring of this year the extreme right-wing DVU (German Peoples Union), run by the Munich publisher Frey, won an unexpected 13 percent of the votes in the state of Saxony-Anhalt.

The election is taking place against the background of an extreme social crisis. The official number of unemployed stands at over 4 million, and there are a further 2 million who are not included in the statistics. Last year the number of those depending on social welfare benefits increased by 7 percent to reach a total of 2.9 million people.

There is no sign of a change in sight. The imminent introduction of the euro currency, with its accompanying rationalisations, the consequences of the crises in Asia and Russia, and the spread of computer technology into the realms of administration and services will drive up the number of unemployed. The consultant Roland Berger predicts that in the coming years 1.5 million jobs will be lost in industry alone. In the next four years every second bank employee will lose his or her job--a total of half a million in all.

In Germany pensions, the health system and aid to the

unemployed are financed by deductions from wages. The growth of unemployment therefore means the ruination of the social support system.

Irrespective of who wins the election, the leading politicians of all parties are agreed that a range of radical "reforms" have to be undertaken immediately after the vote. The term "reform", which once meant improvements in the livings standards of workers, has become a synonym for the destruction of all the social gains of the post-war period.

The traditional opposition between "left" and "right" parties has by and large disappeared. Their programs and election slogans are virtually identical. Indeed, with their demands for a reorganisation of the welfare state, the SPD and the Greens go further in many respects than the CDU.

For example, one of the central demands of the SPD is the reduction of additional wage costs. These are the deductions for pensions, health benefits and unemployment insurance which are directly taken from wages, and to which the employers pay another 50 percent. Given that the SPD has promised a reduction in taxes and public spending, their call for cutting labor costs can only mean a corresponding cut in payments for pensioners, the sick and the unemployed.

The SPD has also been arguing vehemently for a state-subsidised cheap labour sector. The unemployed are to be forced to work for wages far below the German average.

Symptomatic is the naming of the young entrepreneur Jost Stollmann, a millionaire, to the post of economics minister in a future SPD government. Stollmann, who until 1987 was a member of the CDU, has admitted never having read the program of the SPD.

Overall, programmatic questions barely play a role in the election. Rather it resembles a shadow boxing match between advertising agencies. Key words such as "innovation", "modernisation" and "future" dominate the affair. None of the parties openly says what they propose to do after the elections. If they said the truth, the thinking goes, they would have no chance of winning.

The discrepancy between social reality and the election slogans is so crass that the press has commented on it at length. The news magazine *Der Spiegel* dedicated an entire edition to this question and described the election as "the biggest swindle in the post-war history of Germany."

This masquerade is a distorted expression of the profound gulf between the masses of the population and the traditional parties. Formerly the so-called "Volksparteien" (people's parties), the SPD and CDU based themselves on broad layers of workers and the

middle class, which were guaranteed a reasonable income and a half-way secure existence.

Today more and more from these layers are undergoing social decline. Education, apprenticeship, technical training or years of steady work in the factory are no longer a guarantee for a secure future. Instead, social success or failure is more often a question of inherited wealth, the clever placing of investments, or plain luck. Growing numbers of old people, youth, workers and members of the traditional middle classes fight for their existence, while a small but influential elite enjoy indescribable wealth.

The big parties compete for the attention of this elite, which includes most of the politicians and opinion makers in the media industry. To this end the SPD has developed the concept of "the new centre" and made this, in common with their model Tony Blair in Great Britain, the target of their campaign.

The Greens do not miss an opportunity to declare their allegiance to private property. And the PDS--despite its socialist rhetoric--is no exception. The favoured clientele of the PDS are east German small businessmen and would-be entrepreneurs, who feel they have been victimised by the west. In all of those regions where they take part in government, the PDS has carried out policies virtually identical to those of the CDU and SPD.

In this way it is big business interests which determine the path of the elections, while the worries and concerns of the masses of workers are excluded.

See Also:

German federal elections: Partei fr Soziale Gleichheit runs candidates in six states
[27 August 1998]

The social climber:

A biographical sketch of German SPD leader Gerhard Schrder
[8 May 1998]

See the election web site of the Partei fr Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)
[In German]



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