

An election campaign in the shadow of crisis

Ulrich Rippert
11 September 1998

Ulrich Rippert is the chairman of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG--Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the Fourth International. He is a candidate for the PSG in Berlin.

A striking feature of the present federal elections, whose 'hot phase' has just been announced by all the establishment parties, is the enormous discrepancy between the empty election speeches and the real world.

The stock markets are recording new lows; economic and political relations are becoming increasingly threatening. Yet all the party strategists discuss is the colour of the balloons to be employed at the election appearances of the Social Democratic challenger for the chancellorship, Gerhard Schröder.

In special sittings of parliament the government and opposition fling mutual accusations of failure and incompetence at each other, to the amusement of their respective deputies, although they have been collaborating for years and there is nothing to choose between them in all essential questions. The whole thing revolves around who can best and more effectively implement the same policies. It starts to sound increasingly like a family feud amongst the better-off, of no interest to an outsider.

The impression grows that there are two worlds, the real one and the one which is staged by the parties for their election campaigns, complete with fixed-grin politicians, big-name pop stars, entertainment, and routine standing ovations for the thoroughly meaningless phrases about 'innovation' and 'a second modern age,' repeated by rote.

In a land with a long and distinctive political tradition of debate and struggle, this 'Americanisation' of the election campaign is met with widespread rejection. Many people now react irritably to the words 'election campaign.' Nobody expects the elections at the end of the month will solve any of the great social problems, or that the situation will improve in any way.

Why is there such empty phrase-mongering, above all by the SPD? People are used to hearing it from the CDU, and after 16 years in government their programme is well known.

The SPD talks about a 'political change', without saying a single serious political word about what they mean. Confronted with mass unemployment on a scale like the 1930s and a continual rise in the number of welfare benefit recipients, the SPD should be able to conduct a furious election campaign against the Kohl government, condemning them for creating such social misery. But this is precisely what they do not want to do. They fear that a single critical word about the social crisis could be seized upon and unleash a social storm.

They also know that it would not be hard for anyone to work out that the destruction of social gains and democratic rights has happened with the votes of the SPD. One 'solidarity pact' and 'alliance for jobs' has followed the next over the last years. The SPD has no other answers to social problems than those of the present government. Like them, the SPD represents the interests of big business. Their motto also reads: enrich the rich.

The record of social democracy

A glimpse over the border can confirm this. In Britain, the social democrat Tony Blair and his New Labour Party entered government. The scale of the social attacks and destruction of democratic rights since carried through has even taken the wind out of the sails of hard-line Tories. Things are no different in France under Jospin, in Italy with Prodi, Viktor Klima in Austria, and so on. Most European governments are now run by the social democrats, and the political result is horrendous. The number of unemployed in the European Union states has risen to 25 million, even though many governments have introduced state-enforced labour for the unemployed, and promoted part-time working and cheap wage jobs. The gulf gets increasingly wider between the majority of the population who, even if they have work, find it harder to earn enough to look after their families properly, and a small but growing elite of the super rich who plunder society without regard.

There is another reason for the empty phrasemongering. All the parties confront a fundamental social change for which none of them has a serious answer. All the tried and trusted political relationships and mechanisms which were established after the Second World War, and which have stood the test of the last 50 years, are now falling apart and no longer function. Behind the vacuous headlines in the election campaign can be found a deep-going lack of orientation in the establishment parties.

Faced with this situation, the SPD is trying to avoid all serious political discussion and hopes that the widespread opposition to the Kohl government can be translated into votes for the SPD. They are trying to become the strongest party not through winning support for themselves but through the widespread rejection of the government's policies.

The impact of the Russian crisis

The events in Russia over the last weeks have interrupted their cynical calculations. The violent collapse of the rouble and the dramatic swings in the stock markets have unleashed a shock. Faced with a continuing economic and financial crisis in Japan, South East Asia and Latin America, memories are awakened of the terrible consequences of the world economic crisis of the 1930s.

A lead article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last week wrote of the situation in Moscow, 'the long queues before the banks certainly call to mind the fateful days in May 1931 when the world economic crisis began with the collapse of the Vienna Kreditanstalt.'

The crisis in Russia is of special significance for Germany, both politically and economically. With debts of \$30 billion owed to the German banks, they have most to lose in Moscow. The fact that most of these debts are secured by state guarantees from the German government does not lessen the problem. It demonstrates that the German government has played a key role in financing the so-called oligarchs and their mafia structures, which can now be plainly seen by all.

The SPD is in a position to name names. They could show how Yeltsin's disastrous policies have been mainly financed and supported by Germany. Kohl, Yeltsin's close friend and sauna partner, bears the main responsibility for the dramatic crisis in Russia and its consequences.

However, aspiring Chancellor Schröder does the opposite. He stresses

the continuity in foreign policy which a social democratic government would follow. It is becoming ever clearer that the burden of the crisis in Moscow is being pushed onto the shoulders of the working class to the benefit of the oligarchs and the IMF, a policy supported by aspiring presidential candidates such as General Lebed. And yet the SPD has taken over the task of promoting General Lebed throughout Europe as the guarantor for peace and stability. Moreover, it leaves the way open for Kohl to present himself as the hardened crisis-manager.

A government of the SPD and CDU?

With the developing international crisis, the call for a 'grand coalition' in Germany is increasing. In the past, such an alliance of the SPD and CDU was regarded only as an emergency measure. The disadvantages of having no visible, if only formal, parliamentary opposition were seen to outweigh the advantages of a secure government majority. The government would then be able to act completely as it required, say the supporters of this variation. But it would then be very difficult to keep the expected opposition and resistance within parliamentary channels and under control, warn the critics.

The memories of the last grand coalition at the end of the 1960s, under CDU Chancellor Kiesinger and SPD Foreign Minister Willy Brandt, are not the best. At that time the mass student protest movement consciously called itself the Extra-parliamentary Opposition (APO) and put the government under extreme pressure. The grand coalition was soon followed by an SPD-led government. With the slogan, 'dare for more democracy', Willy Brandt then became chancellor. Today, the battle cry of the SPD is 'law and order'. This alone shows the fundamental change in the situation.

Sixteen years have gone by since the last SPD chancellor sat in Bonn. In the early 1980s, the SPD-led government of Helmut Schmidt implemented its first cuts programme; it was met by massive resistance in the factories and offices. Thousands of workers demonstrated in the streets, in the hope they could force the SPD to defend their interests.

If anybody believes today that the SPD is going to carry on from where they left off one and a half decades ago, they will be in for a rude awakening. The party has since undergone a fundamental transformation. The last remaining links to the working class have been systematically destroyed. Today, the SPD functions totally as an instrument of the employers.

Whether the day after the election a coalition is formed under the leadership of either the SPD or the CDU, or in an alliance with the Greens or the FDP, its tasks are already determined. All social gains not already cut are to be massively reduced, and all opposition to this ruthlessly suppressed by state force.

From class collaboration to class war

Barely a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, the present election inaugurates a period of fundamental political change.

For 50 years, since the end of the war, bourgeois rule in West Germany rested on a system of social partnership and class collaboration, as it did in many European countries. All social classes and layers were incorporated into the political system. The government attempted, as far as possible, to mediate these various interests.

In Germany, this system of consensus was highly developed in the form of co-determination (Mitbestimmung) and social partnership and anchored in the legal set-up. However, the globalisation of production and the domination of international capital have taken away the foundation of this policy. Today, it is impossible to reconcile the maintenance of the existing order with social reforms and improvements for the population as a whole.

The maxim is no longer social collaboration but social confrontation. To the extent that the divisions between rich and poor now reach new levels, the 'people's parties' on which political rule was previously based are also collapsing.

Helmut Kohl is running for chancellor for a fifth time. This does not so much express his inability to relinquish power, or that he has failed to hand over the reins in time to his deputy Wolfgang Schäuble as is usually claimed, rather it is an expression of the deep divisions inside the CDU. Kohl is the only one who has been able to control the centrifugal forces which have developed inside the party and, in his own words, 'keep the thing flying'.

Since the CDU was formed after the war as a catch-all for various Christian Democratic movements, it has united quite different social and political forces: farmers, tradesmen, self-employed, small businessmen and big capital, but also a section of workers and union bureaucrats. In the years of the Cold War, the most varied and often opposed interests were kept together by rigid anti-communism. This ideological glue dissolved with the end of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the contradictions between the party's varied clientele started to collide more intensely. The chances of serving such opposing forces became ever smaller.

During his 25 years as chairman of the CDU, Helmut Kohl has established a close web of personal contacts enabling him to circumvent the usually long and tedious decision-making process inside the party. He now fears handing the rudder over to another. There are many indications that the CDU will fly apart after the elections. Such a development can already be seen in several other European countries. After being the central pillar of bourgeois rule in Italy for decades after the war, the Christian Democratic Party has disappeared almost completely. In France, the Gaullists have collapsed into numerous rival organisations, and in England the Tories have been paralysed by a series of national and regional internal conflicts.

The situation is no different inside the SPD. The media hullabaloo surrounding Gerhard Schröder, and the leadership's agreement to suppress all their internal conflicts, has not solved any of the problems. The fact that Schröder and party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine were forced to completely disempower the party executive and other bodies, whose members frequently learn about the most important decisions from press reports, is an expression of growing conflicts and contradictions.

The refusal of the SPD to even mention the deep social crisis also has another consequence worthy of mention. It leaves the social questions to the right-wing demagogues. For the first time in a federal election they have seized on such questions and made them a central part of their propaganda. Just a few months before, the neo-fascist German Peoples Union (DVU) gained the best result for a right-wing radical party since the end of Hitler's rule, with almost 13 percent of the vote in Saxony-Anhalt. This state currently has the highest level of unemployment and an SPD government.

The most important question which is posed in these elections is the need for the working class to act as an independent political force. This is why the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit is participating in the elections. The first paragraph of our election manifesto says, 'It is only the intervention of hundreds of thousands into political life which will put a halt to the high-handed rule of those on the political and economic gravy train.' In order to make such a development of the working class possible, the PSG fights for a programme which is diametrically opposed to the logic of the capitalist market. Against the narrow-minded and reactionary interests of a privileged elite, the PSG advances the conception of a society based on social solidarity.

The election also means a new period in the political development of the working class. The vast majority of workers already reject the SPD, or at least they are critical of them. However, many hope that it might be possible to put pressure on them to at least alleviate matters slightly. In

any future government, the SPD will confront workers as a determined opponent and enemy. This clears the fronts. The fact that there is an interest in new socialist perspectives is shown by the many letters that have been sent to the PSG.

See Also:

The German Elections:

Letters and e-mails ask more about the Socialist Equality Party and its policies

[5 September 1998]

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) Election Programme 1998:

For an independent political movement of the working class

[28 August 1998]

See the election web site of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)

[In German]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact