

Germany after the elections

A balance sheet and perspectives

Central Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The federal elections of September 27 mark a radical change in the political life of Germany. After 16 years under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, when political developments seemed to flow like treacle, they are starting to move rapidly once again. For a great part of the population this is the first change of government; anyone in his or her mid-thirties has experienced only the Kohl government.

The election result was a landslide. After 25 years of electoral decline, the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) vote of 40.9 percent in Germany as a whole (and 42.2 percent in the west) compares to its best results in the 1970s. For the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) the 35.1 percent polled is by far the worst result in their history.

The swing is even clearer if the votes of the CDU/CSU together with the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), their former coalition partners, are compared with the combined vote of the SPD and the Greens. Between 1969 and 1990 there was hardly any change in the proportion of the vote each of these blocs received. The change of government in 1982, when Kohl replaced SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, was due to the FDP, the junior coalition partners, changing their allegiance.

In seven consecutive elections, the CDU/CSU and FDP commanded between 52 and 56 percent of the vote, whereas the SPD and the Greens managed between 43 and 46 percent. Now the relationship has been reversed. The CDU/CSU and FDP gained only 41 percent, while the SPD and Greens achieved 48 percent, or 53 percent if the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS--formerly the ruling party in Stalinist East Germany) is included.

The election result has a clear class character. All studies of the election agree that the behaviour of the working class was the decisive factor. The *Freiburg Election Working Group* write: 'A significant factor determining the outcome of the election was the massive turn away from the CDU/CSU by middle and lower sections of the working population in both east and west.'

Whereas in 1990, the year of German unification, one in two East German workers voted for the CDU, this time it was just one in four. For the first time, the SPD became the largest party amongst working class voters. The PDS have almost doubled their share of the vote since 1990 and saw their best results in urban areas suffering from severe economic and social problems. According to the study quoted above, the Social Democrats in the west 'won back voters from the lower middle class and working class in areas where they had largely gone over to the CDU/CSU in the 1970s.'

The election was a clear plebiscite against unemployment and cuts in the welfare state. Social questions were central. According to one opinion poll, 88 percent of respondents ranked unemployment as the most serious problem. Other themes such as 'crime and drugs' or 'foreigners' were ranked first by just 12 percent of respondents. Over half said they thought that Schröder 'would act to create and save jobs'. Only one in five still expressed confidence in Kohl.

A fundamental contradiction can be seen in the election result, one that will be decisive for coming political developments. While the electorate has clearly moved to the left, the parties for which they voted have moved all the more clearly to the right. They are neither willing nor able to fulfil the expectations that have been invested in them. Despite the unambiguous result, the federal elections herald a new period of political instability. Social relations have started to change and this will continue.

The transformation of the SPD and the Greens

Over the course of Kohl's 16-year-long premiership, the SPD transformed itself from a party of reforms into a party of cuts. Their control of the majority of Germany's 16 state governments and many of its local administrations means they have long called the tune when it comes to implementing cuts in public service jobs and education, and carrying out the privatisation of state-owned concerns.

The SPD has deteriorated into a party of functionaries, with hardly any active members amongst workers. Whilst in the 1970s former SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt enjoyed the active support of many workers, today workers' support is purely passive. Rather than a vote of confidence in Schröder, the result was a vote of no-confidence in Kohl. According to many opinion polls, a quarter of the electorate only made up their mind whom to vote for just before the ballot.

In its election campaign, the SPD presented itself as a party of 'modern' economics, i.e., friendly to business. Its slogan referring to the 'new centre ground' was addressed to middle class FDP and CDU voters. But it was mainly workers and the unemployed who ensured the SPD's victory. This not only surprised the party leadership, but shocked it. Their victory celebrations were on the whole a muted affair.

The Greens were just as shocked by the result. One of their parliamentary deputies, Angelika Beer, summed up the mood in the party now that it faces the reality of government as 'totally uncertain, and we will have to swallow everything demanded of us.'

The Greens' entry into the cabinet means that for the first time those who originated in the protest movements of the 1960s will have government responsibility at the national level. They formed the party at the end of the 1970s as a reaction to the rightward turn of the SPD under Helmut Schmidt. They were mainly concerned with environmental questions, participated in the peace movement and had far more radical policies than the SPD on social and democratic questions. To many, they were regarded as a left alternative to the social democrats.

Since then the student protesters have become well-off lawyers, university lecturers and state officials. The Greens have gone from being a party of protest to a party of the *Mittelstand* (small and medium-sized business). Their strongholds lie 'in centres of the service industries where there is a high percentage of administrative and managerial workers and persons with higher education' (*Freiburg Election Working Group*). Their desire to have a share in power displaced all other principles.

With the plans to name Greens leader Joschka Fischer as foreign minister and vice chancellor, this transformation has reached its conclusion. According to the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* (edited by Helmut Schmidt), Fischer 'more closely represents classic German foreign policy than some in the SPD'. Fischer summed up his political standpoint with the words, 'There is no Green foreign policy, just a German one.' His appointment to one of the highest offices of state serves to remind the Greens of their new responsibilities: 'Having a share in real power will domesticate the Greens--especially as any foreign policy nonsense might damage their symbol of the coalition, Foreign Minister Joseph Fischer,' wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on October 1.

What can be expected from the new government?

Schröder is often compared to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, or US President Bill Clinton. As far as his political goals are concerned, this is correct. Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences. Both Blair and Clinton were able to rest on the work of their conservative predecessors Thatcher and Reagan/Bush, who carried through radical cuts in the welfare state and social spending. Schröder must undertake this task himself.

Blair and Clinton were able to use a conjunctural upturn in the first years of their government, while Schröder enters office in the midst of a deep crisis in the world economy. The crisis in Asia has spread to Russia and Latin America and transformed the world's stock exchanges into a wild roller coaster ride, with no end in sight. Germany is already having to revise downward all of its economic prognoses.

The future of the Schröder government will be far more tense and filled with conflict than the first years of Blair and Clinton. Along with the contradiction between the government's aims and the voters' expectations, the consequences of the international economic crisis will mark coming developments.

It is in this context that the advice given by Helmut Schmidt, the last Social Democratic chancellor, to his successor should be understood. Schmidt recommended that Schröder's first speech be about blood, sweat and tears. The headline on the front page of *die Zeit* read, 'The Chancellor's test of courage'. In the article, Schmidt wrote that as soon as the government was formed Schröder should 'appeal to the nation's morals and powers of judgement'. 'After a ruthless stock-taking, Schröder will have to come to the conclusion that many wishes cannot be fulfilled and some hobby-horses cannot be saddled.'

'Cutting away at unemployment' and 'the alliance for work'

Although the coalition talks between the SPD and the Greens are only in their opening phase, the basic shape of the coming government's policies can be seen. At the centre of these policies is the 'cutting away of unemployment'. This does not signify an improvement in conditions for the unemployed. Rather, the state is going to apply pressure, forcing them to accept low-paid jobs. This will follow the American and Dutch models. In both these countries the official level of unemployment has gone down as the numbers in low-wage jobs, part-time and contract labour positions have increased dramatically.

Bodo Hombach, who as chancellor minister will hold a key position in the new government, wrote an article for the news magazine *Der Spiegel* making clear what they have in mind. What has to be overcome is 'a type of safety-first mentality,' he said. 'What we need is equality of opportunity, and not outcome,' he added. The key concept is the 'activating state'.

He praised the American welfare reforms of 1996 that ended many social provisions at a stroke. Welfare should not be a life style, but a second chance, he quoted approvingly from Clinton. 'It is clear to me,'

Hombach continued, 'the enormous pressure on the unemployed and welfare recipients to accept a job is regarded here as the main flaw of the American system. But the debate whether any job is better than no job at all has already reached us.' He said that the real marvel was not to be found in the US but in Germany, and quoted the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: 'Having no job is still regarded as better than having a 'McJob'.'

The foundation of future social policy is the 'alliance for work'. The Labour Ministry will be taken over by Walter Riester, deputy chairman of Germany's biggest union, the *IG Metall*. This places the whole union apparatus at the government's disposal.

Hardly had the election result been confirmed than a new tone could be heard coming from union headquarters. Economics Minister designate Jost Stollmann, who was subjected to intense criticism for his business-friendly utterances during the election campaign, is now warmly praised. A member of the German Union Federation (DGB) said that as a computer entrepreneur Stollmann would be able to contribute much to the development of branches of the economy with a future. He could open up new opportunities on the world market. Dieter Schulte, head of the DGB, promised wage restraint if the secondary costs of employment were cut. Before the election they had said that after years of cuts in real wages, a hefty increase was in order.

The employers' organisations, which were disapproving before the election, now welcome the 'alliance for work'. For them, it will be a lucrative affair. The cuts in secondary employment costs should increase their profits, and if in turn the unions exercise wage restraint, then profits will rise even more.

The Dutch and Danish models are the ones to be followed. In Denmark, a coalition between the social democratic government, the unions and the employers recently cut unemployment benefits. The jobless can be forced to accept a position outside their normal field of employment after just three months, instead of six as in the past. The newspaper *Politiken* commented that in the past there would have been laughter if somebody had said that a social democratic government and the unions, together with the employers and all the other political parties, including the extreme right, would deliver up some of the Danish welfare state's holiest of cows to the slaughterhouse.

A 'social Europe'?

Following the elections in Germany, social democrats now head 10 out of the 15 European Union (EU) states. In three of the others they are part of coalition governments. Only in Ireland and Spain do the conservatives govern alone. This has unleashed much speculation about a 'Social Europe'.

A glance at the practices of European governments exposes such hopes as an illusion. They differ from their conservative predecessors not so much by the content of their policies, as by their ability to better control the opposition to them. Faced with widespread resistance, conservative majorities in Italy and France failed in their attempts to push through budget cuts prescribed by the Maastricht treaty, whereas social democratic governments succeeded.

The SPD and the Greens have long since promised to continue the European policies of the Kohl government. Likewise, they are for a restrictive budget policy and defend the independence of the European Central Bank. In practice, this means abandoning all democratic controls and leaving currency policy to the banks. When Germany takes over the EU presidency in January 1999, the Schröder government will take on direct responsibility for the introduction of the common European currency.

The introduction of the euro will set off a series of political developments. The cross-border mobility of capital will make it ever clearer to European workers that they can only oppose attacks on social

spending if they are united. The fading of European borders will accelerate the decay of all the old parties, which were kept together by national interests.

Regionalist demands can already be heard throughout all the parties. In the SPD this is especially the case with Wolfgang Clement, prime minister of North Rhine Westphalia, Germany's most populous and heavily industrialised state. When he took office earlier in the year he said that he would soon be more powerful than the federal minister of economics in Bonn.

In Munich, Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber has formed a type of counter-government, 'completely fashioning his state government to his needs as the future leader of the opposition in the federal parliament,' as the *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented. To this end, his state chancellery is recruiting additional personnel and being given new powers so as 'to form the future bridgehead of the CSU against the Bonn government,' the same article commented.

The outbreak of regional contradictions, which has a long and fateful tradition in Germany, contains the potential for many future conflicts and political crises.

What next?

The most important task arising out of the federal elections is the construction of a socialist alternative to the SPD. The coming development will be characterised by social conflicts with the government, but this will not automatically lead to the working class breaking politically with social democracy. As disappointment with government policy grows, the danger can arise of extreme right-wing parties benefiting.

The state election in Saxony Anhalt earlier this year was an alarm signal. The neo-fascist German Peoples Union (DVU) won almost 13 percent of the vote. In the federal elections this sank to 3.2 percent, and the DVU and other extreme right-wing parties together only managed 3.3 percent nationally. The move against the Kohl government took the wind out of their sails. However, this does not mean that the danger from the right has been banished. The extreme right continues to enjoy support amongst younger layers in particular. Among 18 to 24 year olds in the east, one in five voted for them, and nearly one in ten in the west. Only the independent action of the working class can finally put a stop to them.

At present the PDS is attempting to position itself as the socialist opposition to the new government. To underscore this claim, they have said they will not vote for Schröder as chancellor when parliament assembles. As he does not depend on their votes to become chancellor, this is easy for them to do. However, their claim to be a socialist opposition is exposed as a fraud as soon as the SPD and CDU really need their support. This is the case in many local administrations in eastern Germany, where the PDS has taken on government responsibility and works closely with both the SPD and the CDU. In Mecklenburg Pomerania, and probably soon in Thuringia and Saxony Anhalt, they are preparing to enter coalition state governments with the SPD. This will make them an important prop for Schröder in the east German states.

A political alternative to the SPD can only be developed based on an international socialist programme. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG--Socialist Equality Party) was the only party that presented such a programme in the elections. The PSG made clear that globalisation had undermined the policy of social reformism. For this reason, only a programme that is directed against the foundations of the capitalist economic order corresponds to the needs of the mass of the population. The PSG resolutely opposes any conception that pressure from below might force the SPD and the unions to take up policies in the interests of the working class.

This programme has only found a small audience so far. In the six states

where the PSG stood candidates the party received 6,273 votes. Of these 2,395 were in Saxony Anhalt. However, the coming period will give politically thoughtful workers enough opportunities to become convinced of its correctness and necessity.

The political crises, debates and conflicts that will inevitably arise out of the tense social situation will create many possibilities for socialist views to gain an audience. To this end, the Fourth International has created an important tool with the *World Socialist Web Site*. It disseminates the socialist outlook and understanding that will enable the working class to intervene in political events as an independent force.

See Also:

1998 German Federal Elections



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