Huge losses for Social Democrats in German state election

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The election held last Sunday in the state of Brandenburg is regarded as the final opportunity this year to gauge the mood of the German electorate. The election confirmed a trend which was already evident in the Bavarian state election of last September.

Voter support for the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) is haemorrhaging on a huge scale, allowing the opposition conservative union parties (CDU—Christian Democratic Party and CSU—Christian Social Union) and the liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) to benefit. These latter parties, however, constitute no real political alternative and have only been able to profit from the fact that, in opposition, they are less affected by the wave of popular anger at the government's policies.

For the first time since 1990 the CDU has emerged as the strongest party in the state with 28 percent of the vote. In similar elections five years ago the CDU received just half the votes won by the SPD. This time the SPD slumped from its previous rating of 39 percent five years ago to just 24 percent, winning only slightly more votes than the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—successor party to the East German Stalinist SED), which maintained its vote at 21 percent. The FDP increased its vote from 4 percent to 6 percent.

These figures take on a new significance, however, when one takes into account voter participation. Five years ago 78 percent of the electorate turned out to vote—this time it was only 46 percent. When this change is taken into account then just 12 percent of voters supported the CDU, while a third of the entire electorate turned out to vote for the three main parties combined (CDU, SPD and PDS). This can hardly be regarded as a representative majority!

Commentators were agreed that the result of the election was the comeuppance for the programme of social cuts known as "Agenda 2010" introduced by the German government. The chairman of the SPD and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder duly conceded "joint responsibility" for the election result. The prime minister of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck (SPD), who took office only 11 months ago, also blamed national government policies for his party's defeat.

Nevertheless, as was the case in the Bavarian elections, the response of the SPD leadership to this latest election is .... carry on as usual! If some voters thought they could influence the SPD to change course, then they were rapidly corrected by Schröder. The only possibility open to the government, he stated, was to press forward with the process of reforms in a determined and united manner.

The other response by Schröder and Platzeck was to blame the electorate for their defeat, claiming that voters had failed to understand the SPD reform policy. One is reminded of the well-known saying of the dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who commented on the suppression of the workers uprising of June 17, 1953 with the satirical remark: "If the government is not happy with the people it should elect another."

In reality, the result of the Brandenburg election demonstrates that the electorate had a very good grasp of the implications of the SPD policies—and demonstrated their opposition.

With the SPD and CDU competing to come up with ever more drastic proposals for cuts to the German welfare state system, and the PDS anxious to demonstrate at its latest party conference (also held last weekend) its affinity to the free market and profit system, more than half of the electorate in Brandenburg saw no sense in going to the polls. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* concluded, "The majority of those who did not turn out to vote in Brandenburg (56 percent)

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corresponds almost exactly to the result of a recent national opinion poll: 58 percent do not trust any of the parties to solve social problems."

After the announcement of the election result the chairman of the Brandenburg CDU, Jörg Schönbohm, who holds the post of minister of the interior in the current "grand" state coalition of the CDU and SPD, was already grooming himself as new prime minister. However, the jubilance exhibited by this former army general who belongs to the extreme right of the CDU could prove to be premature. The current "strength" of the union is based exclusively on the absence of anybody articulating or putting forward alternatives to tackle the concerns and needs of the broad majority of the population. At no other point in the history of postwar Germany has the gulf between establishment politics and the population as a whole been so visible and dramatic.

In common with all of the established parties, the German trade unions have also ditched any sort of opposition to "Agenda 2010." According to *Der Spiegel*, the new motto of the German trade unions (DGB) is "Forward and Forget" and the news magazine went on to report that "the man at the top has called upon his colleagues in the eight constituent individual trade unions to engage in a 'constructive dialogue' with the government."

The line of the DGB leadership seems to have born fruit. Germany's two biggest unions, Ver.di and IG Metall, who have posed up until now as opponents of "Agenda 2010," are not taking part in a national demonstration protesting the dismantling of the German welfare state planned for November 1. According to Frank Bsirske, the chairman of Ver.di who plans to meet the chancellor soon for a personal discussion, there is "no alternative to dialogue, otherwise we only weaken both sides."

Similar remarks were made by the newly elected chairman of IG-Metall, Jürgen Peters: "Trade unions and social democracy are not the same thing, but the one without the other is unthinkable." Peters has a long record of close relations with the chancellor based on their joint collaboration in the state of Lower Saxony (Schröder's former power base) and the Volkswagen car company.

Meanwhile in his search for partners the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, has cast his gaze even further to the right. On Monday he paid a visit to the presidium of the CSU—a first in the history of the DGB—and agreed that the trade unions would work together with the CSU on the issue of reforms to the health system. After the meeting Sommer declared that he was "very grateful" for the talks and then went onto praise the conservative right-wing party of Edmund Stoiber and Franz Strauß as a "protecting hand for the ordinary man."

It is not possible for such a political vacuum to persist forever. It has to be filled. This law applies as much in politics as it does in physics. The inability of such parties as the SPD, PDS or the Greens to fill this vacuum has been made clear repeatedly during the past months. All of these parties react to the growing discontent over social cuts by shifting continually to the right. Neither grassroots pressure nor punishment at the polls is sufficient to deter them from their political course.

The only way to resolve the concerns and anger motivating millions and draw them into political activity is the creation of a new workers party that places social needs above the interests of big business and the wealthy.

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