

Germany: Schröder calls for early federal election after Social Democratic debacle in North Rhine Westphalia

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The Social Democratic Party (SPD) lost control of the state legislature in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine Westphalia (NRW), in elections held Sunday. It was the worst result for the SPD in 50 years, and marked the fall of the last remaining Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government at the state level. The SPD and Greens have held power, in coalition, at the federal level since 1998.

Following the election defeat, Schröder announced that the SPD-Green coalition would push for a new federal election this coming autumn, one year ahead of the normal completion of the national government's current four-year term.

The SPD won only 37.1 percent of the votes cast, down 5.7 points since the last state election in NRW five years ago. The Greens, the SPD's coalition partners in the state assembly in Düsseldorf, received 6.2 percent of the vote, down 0.9 percent.

The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) won the largest share of the vote, with 44.8 percent (up 7.8 percent). The "free-market" Free Democratic Party (FDP) finished with 6.2 percent, down 3.6 percent as compared to 2000, when the party was lead by Jürgen Möllemann.

The Election Alternative—Work & Social Justice (WASG) grouping, largely comprised of disgruntled SPD and union bureaucrats, stood candidates for the first time, but gained only 2.2 percent, falling short of the 5 percent threshold needed to win representation in the state legislature.

Election turnout was 62 percent of registered voters, up some 5 percent from the 2000 state election.

Polling stations had only just closed and the first computer forecasts were not even 30 minutes old when the federal chairman of the SPD, Franz Müntefering, appeared before the media to say that Chancellor Schröder was calling a general election in the autumn of 2005, one year early.

Schröder later told the press that the election result in North Rhine Westphalia was a serious defeat for the SPD, and placed a question mark over the political basis for continuing his work. "I consider it essential to have the clear support of the majority of German people," he said. He added that he regarded it as his "obligation and responsibility" to enable German President Horst Köhler to call fresh elections for the Bundestag (the

federal parliament) as soon as possible—realistically, in the autumn of this year.

Regardless of the substantial loss of votes and widespread opposition to mass unemployment and welfare cuts, both Schröder and Müntefering said there would be no change in political course by the federal government. There was no alternative to the social cuts being pushed through as part of the government's "Agenda 2010" and "Hartz IV" reforms, the SPD leaders declared. Müntefering said, "The way to renew the country is through the reforms being introduced by us."

The early Bundestag election thus has the character of a political ultimatum. Knowing full well that the CDU, its Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the FDP are planning even harsher and more far-reaching social attacks, Schröder and Müntefering have turned to the electorate and asked them to choose between plague and cholera!

If voters will not accept the Hartz IV cuts being carried out by the SPD-Green Party coalition in Berlin, then the government is quite prepared to hand over political power to the CDU/CSU and FDP, which would implement the same policies, but in an even harsher and more precipitous form. The SPD, Schröder implied, would act as a loyal and constructive opposition, or as a partner in a grand coalition to realize these policies.

The SPD leadership further calculates that the Bundestag election campaign, which for all practical purposes began with Schröder's announcement, will help it unify the party and prevent splits arising from deep divisions over the course of the "Red-Green" federal government.

The NRW election reflects the irrevocable break of the SPD with the working class. In no other state was the SPD so closely linked to its erstwhile working class base. For 39 years, the SPD ruled in the state capital Düsseldorf. For many years, the SPD was able to achieve an absolute majority in the Ruhr, the former heartland of steel and coal production, in which 5 million people still live.

The concentration of steel and coal production in North Rhine Westphalia meant that from the 1950s it was the real heartland of the SPD. The political debacle the party has suffered in this state is irreversible.

The links between the SPD and working people have finally been severed, and the election result vouches for this fact. The SPD vote in NRW represents the party's worst result in a state election since 1954. Only one in five voters cast a ballot for the SPD. In NRW state elections held in 1985 and 1990, the SPD had been able to win over 50 percent of the votes cast.

Many directly elected SPD constituency candidates lost out to the CDU, and the SPD was able to cling to its seats only in urban constituencies in the Ruhr region. However, the SPD's share of the vote fell there as well. In cities such as Dortmund, Duisburg and Essen, where it once received over 60 percent of the vote, the SPD vote barely reached 50 percent. Compared to the state elections five years ago, the SPD lost between 6 and 7.5 percent in Ruhr constituencies. Turnout here, at 55 percent, was also far lower.

Initial analysis of the results shows that the SPD suffered losses particularly among its traditional supporters. It lost about 9 percentage points among workers and union members, and lost some 8 percent of its previous vote among voters aged 30-44.

While the party picked up 170,000 votes from those who had previously not voted, it lost 290,000 votes to the CDU and 50,000 to the WASG. In total, the SPD received 3.1 million votes. Compared to the 1998 Bundestag election, when the SPD won just over 5 million votes in NRW, this represents a loss of some 40 percent.

The NRW debacle marked the eleventh straight state election in which the SPD suffered a drastic decline in its vote. The Greens, for their part, are no longer represented in a single state government. This is the consequence of their anti-social and reactionary policies, which are exclusively oriented at defending the interests of the big corporations and employers' associations.

Seven years ago, in the summer of 1998, the SPD conducted its election campaign for the Bundestag under the slogan "innovation and justice," and promised economic growth and the development of the social security system. The opposite has happened. Under the pressure of the international financial markets, the SPD-Green Party government in Berlin has carried out an unparalleled redistribution of wealth from those at the bottom to those at the top.

Corporate taxes have been lowered from 53 percent to 25 percent since the era of Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU). The largest tax cut for big business was carried out by the Schröder government in 2000—a reduction from 42 to 25 percent. As a result, state income from corporate taxes, which amounted to 23.6 billion euros in 2000, slumped the following year to minus 0.4 billion euros, and only began to rise in the following years.

Sinking tax receipts and "empty public coffers" were cited as the reasons for ever new attacks on past social gains. No government since the 1930s has carried through such drastic social cuts as those imposed by the SPD-Green Party coalition in Berlin. "Social inequality is a fact, and in some areas it has

grown in recent years," is how an official government report into poverty described the situation.

Repeatedly, government representatives have justified social cuts with the argument that this is the only way to get the economy moving and reduce unemployment. At the beginning of the year, corporations included in the DAX stock exchange listing revealed that they had earned 60 percent more over the last 12 months, with dividend payments rising by an average of 40 percent. At the same time, unemployment in Germany rose to over 5 million.

The balance sheet of the Schröder government reads: highest-ever profits and highest-ever unemployment—a situation that has provoked strong opposition in the general population. But it has now become a post-election routine that the chancellor or some other SPD spokesperson steps before the cameras to declare that the election result will have no influence on government policy.

Last year, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets and protested against the anti-social policies of the SPD-Green Party coalition, government spokesmen declared they would not be swayed by pressure "from the streets." Neither did the SPD's massive loss of membership lead the party leadership to rethink its positions. Quite the opposite. There are many in the party executive who believe that the social cuts in Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV reforms can be more easily imposed if supporters of social justice and equality leave the party.

The critique of capitalism—comparing international financiers to "locusts"—recently made by SPD leader Müntefering, and his complaints that the employers were not exhibiting sufficient political responsibility, were seen by the electorate for what they were: an absurd piece of election theatrics. The division of labour between Müntefering and Schröder was clear for all to see. While the first was comparing international companies and fund managers to locusts, the latter was announcing further cuts in business taxes.



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