Germany: divisions and conflicts within the SPD-Green coalition

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Intense conflicts have erupted within the ruling Social Democratic (SPD)-Green Party coalition following German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's announcement of an early federal election. For a while, there was speculation that the Greens might withdraw their ministers prematurely from the ruling coalition in protest at the move by the SPD. Such action would have forced a parliamentary reshuffle before the anticipated autumn election.

According to news agency reports, Chancellor Schröder (SPD) and Vice Chancellor Joschka Fischer (Green Party) had "a sharp and heated exchange of words" on the telephone that failed to resolve any of the outstanding differences. Schröder was forced to explain afterwards that he was not seeking to end the SPD-Green coalition.

At the beginning of this week, the SPD and Green Party had a coalition meeting and eventually agreed to continue their cooperation. At the end of a press conference, SPD Chairman Franz Münterfering announced that he and Krista Sager, the leader of the Green parliamentary faction, had come to "an agreement" and explained that they had "misunderstood" one another last week.

Schröder promised he would inform Vice Chancellor Fischer "in good time" about his plans for dissolving parliament—plans which raise problematical constitutional issues, and are being dealt with in a highly secretive manner.

The background to the split is the growing inclination of the SPD to ditch its present coalition with the Greens and move towards a "grand coalition" with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). There was open discussion about such a course immediately after the state election in Schleswig-Holstein three months ago. At that time, the anticipated formation of an SPD-Green state administration under Heidi Simonis (SPD) was torpedoed by a single anonymous "no" vote from a deputy within the ranks of the SPD. Following its defeat in the state election, the SPD assumed the role of junior partner in a CDU-led grand coalition in Schleswig-Holstein.

The Greens fear for their political survival in the event of a similar development at the federal level. Following their recent election defeat in North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), the Greens no longer have representation in any state government, and a loss of power in the federal government would endanger the very existence of the party.

Schröder's announcement of an early election unleashed a wave of horror, dismay and rebellion in the ranks of the Greens. In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the chancellor admitted that, together with SPD Chairman Münterfering, he had been preparing the way for such a decision for some time and had been forging concrete plans.

Nevertheless, he did not inform any of the leading members of the Greens, with the exception of Fischer, the foreign minister. And even Fischer, who is regarded as the undisputed leader of the Greens, even though he holds no such official party position, was told about the decision to hold an early election only a few hours before it was announced.

In the ensuing days, attacks on the Greens from prominent SPD circles began to be heard and grow increasingly shrill.

Through his spokesman, Bela Anda, Schröder indicated that "leading figures in the Green Party" were blocking the agreed reduction in corporation taxes and were prepared to vote against the measure at its second and third readings in parliament. The deputy chairman of the SPD faction, Joachim Poß, echoed the accusation, saying the Green faction leaders had told him they would no longer support "the corporation tax relief decided by the cabinet."

Green Party finance expert Christina Scheel responded by denying the charge and declaring it a "disgrace." In the name of the Green faction, she rejected the claims as "totally false" and said it was only a question of ensuring sufficient finances to replace the income lost from the planned lowering of taxes.

Other SPD politicians have stoked up the dispute. The head of the SPD-Free Democratic regional government in Rheinland-Pfalz, Kurt Beck (SPD), said in several interviews that the Greens were sometimes unreliable partners. He had often found, he declared, that the Greens did not stick to agreements. Asked whether he could imagine another form of coalition at a national level, Beck answered, "Of course I can imagine that."

The SPD chairman in the state of Lower Saxony, Sigmar Gabriel, allowed journalists to note his statement that the Greens were "jointly responsible for the dismal results for the Social Democrats" in the recent election in the former SPD stronghold of North-Rhine Westphalia. The newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* quoted him as saying: "The Greens have a tendency to

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overload investment projects and planning and innovation initiatives with extravagant bureaucracies, which then become an obstacle to the creation of secure new jobs in Germany." The leader of the Green Party, Reinhard Bütikofer, responded by calling such comments "stupid gossip."

Finally, Fischer found himself forced to warn the SPD publicly to consider very carefully the consequences of distancing itself from the Green party and striving for a grand coalition after the new federal election. "If the SPD want to have a chancellor in power in the future, it can take place only with us," he wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung.*

These quarrels within the SPD-Green coalition are a reflection of the catastrophic failure of the political perspective of the two parties. Seven years after the coalition assumed power, the policies of the SPD and the Green Party are in ruins.

Schröder and Fischer took office in 1998 with the slogan "Innovation and Justice." After 17 years of CDU rule under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, social services and industry were to be modernised and the quality of life improved. The promises of innovation won the SPD and Greens the support of commercial and business associations, which no longer believed the decrepit Kohl government to be capable of undertaking energetic initiatives. Once he won control of the federal government, Schröder quickly proved himself to be the "comrade of the bosses."

The electoral promises of "justice" also won the SPD and Greens the half-hearted support of working people, who were eager for an end to the cuts in social services under Kohl.

What they got instead was a narrow-minded, short-sighted regime whose policies were dictated by business and commercial organisations and whose personnel consisted of second-rate officials such as Peter Harz, working in alliance with trade union bureaucrats like Harald Schartau (SPD) and Peter Gasse (IG Metall).

While incomes and wage levels sank and the most sweeping cuts in social services since the 1930s were imposed, the promised business and industrial upturn failed to materialize. Employers, high-income individuals and big companies benefited considerably from the lower taxes introduced by the SPD-Green government, but unemployment kept climbing and social misery rapidly spread.

After seven years of the SPD-Green coalition, people in the lower half of the earnings scale control just over 4 percent of the total social wealth, while the richest 10 percent own and control 44 percent of all wealth. The SPD-Green coalition has presided over a redistribution of some 30 billion euros from the poor to the rich.

"If we don't significantly reduce the unemployment rate, then we won't deserve to be re-elected," Schröder declared in December 1998, a few weeks after his election as chancellor. At that time, the official unemployment figure stood at 3.9 million. In February of this year it had climbed to 5.2 million.

As a result, party members and traditional supporters in the working class are abandoning the SPD in droves. The party has lost eleven regional elections in succession. For its part, the Green Party has transformed itself into a party of the higher paid, mainly distinguishable from the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) by the fact that its supporters tend to live a somewhat less conventional lifestyle.

In North-Rhine Westphalia, the Schröder-Fischer regime paid the price for its reactionary politics and social cuts. Both parties have reacted to this electoral debacle with an unmistakable lurch further to the right.

Amongst the leadership of the SPD, more voices are being raised for a grand coalition or, at the very least, a closer collaboration with the CDU after the election, in order to push through the official "reform programme." That is the meaning of Müntefering's announcement, "The renewal of the country through the reforms we introduced will be continued."

For a long time the Green Party has seen its role as ensuring that the SPD not capitulate to pressure from protest demonstrations against the government's Hartz IV "reform" measures and carry through the social cuts with the necessary firmness. Now they too are putting out feelers toward the CDU, with which they have already formed coalitions in many towns and communities.

According to the *Financial Times Deutschland*, GreenParliamentary Minister Jerzy Montag does not rule out the possibility of a CDU-Green national coalition in the future. "We don't have to chain ourselves to the Social Democrats,"said Montag, adding that there were was a point of common interest with an "enlightened, democratic union." The acting chairman of the Green faction, Reinhard Loske, went even further, saying there were some political areas of agreement with the CDU—for instance, on bioethics and policies for small business.

The strife within the SPD-Green household marks the end of a political period and forms the background to the transition to a government which—irrespective of the combination of parties that comprise it—will seek to implement even more drastic attacks on social conditions and democratic rights.

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