Germany: election program of the CDU-CSU opposition

Right-wing, but not enough for the ruling elite

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On July 11 the executive committees of Germany's conservative opposition parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU)—collectively known as "the Union"—adopted their election program and presented it to the public. The pompous manifesto, put forward as the basis for the policies of a new government, is entitled "Use Germany's chances. Growth. Employment. Security."

It is the most right-wing and reactionary program ever drawn up for German parliamentary (Bundestag) elections by the two allied conservative parties. This becomes especially clear when one compares it to the last years in office of the CDU government led by former chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Figures such as Norbert Blüm, who was employment minister for 16 years under Kohl and was hated at the time because of his attacks on pensions and social entitlements, today play only a marginal role in the CDU and stand on its outermost "left wing." Horst Seehofer, Kohl's minister of health, has suffered a similar fate within the CSU. According to the new Union election program the nursing insurance for old people, introduced by Blüm and considered his lifetime's achievement, is to be virtually abolished.

The Union program adopts, continues and intensifies all of the attacks on social and democratic rights which have been introduced by Germany's current ruling SPD (Social Democratic Party)—Green Party coalition during its seven years in office. The government's savage onslaught against the German welfare system, the Hartz IV laws, are to be retained and "optimized." Taxes for big business and the rich are to be lowered even further, while the broad population will be subjected to a 2 percent increase in value added tax.

The central slogan of the CDU-CSU program's social policy reads: "Social is that which creates work," whereby "work creation" is understood exclusively in terms of decreasing wages, and dismantling existing tariff regulations and social and welfare entitlements. The SPD politician Ludwig Stiegler may have exaggerated when he controversially compared the CDU slogan with the motto over the gates of the Nazi concentration camps: "Work makes free." But the program gives no indication of any bottom line where work becomes anti-social. It does not foresee any sort of minimum wage. According to the definition "Social is that which creates work," even the introduction of slavery could be regarded as "social."

Domestic, security and immigration policies in the document show the imprint of the Bavarian minister of the interior and extreme right-winger, Günther Beckstein (CSU). Under the slogan "zero tolerance for criminal behavior and vandalism," the program proposes drastic restrictions of democratic rights. In the field of foreign policy the Union wants to move closer to the US. "We will revitalize transatlantic cooperation with the US," the program states.

Despite the clear right-wing orientation of the election program, it is not the breakthrough the country's ruling elite had hoped for. What the CDU chair Angela Merkel calls "fully coordinated policy" consists in fact largely of compromises, ill-defined suggestions and omissions.

For the political establishment and the employers' associations the assumption of government by the Union provides an opportunity to radically change the social system through privatization of health and pension provision, as well as drastic moves towards deregulation and increased flexibility of the job market, in order to be able compete on an international level. But this requires a confrontation with broad sections of the population—a path which a layer within the CDU-CSU is not prepared to risk.

As a result the program was either treated with restraint or attacked from the right by the media. For many commentators it appeared too timid and too vague. The president of the employers' association, Dieter Hundt, expressed his disappointment that tax gifts for his clientele proposed by the Union were not generous enough and demanded that increased sacrifices had to be made by the population as a whole.

Der Spiegel commentated on the program: "The sharp-edged tools have disappeared from the opposition leader's inventory. Ms. Merkel is now working with the methods of homoeopathy as well."

The mouthpiece of the Swiss banks, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, even condemned the program as "socialist." It commented that the Union had missed the chance to develop a clear profile: "That which is outlined in the program recalls in many passages the more or less socialist approach of the Kohl era."

The *Süddeutschen Zeitung* remarked that the Union program is "a Christian-democratic updating of [Chancellor Gerhard] Schröder's agenda 2010, a little bit more consistent and rigorous perhaps, but certainly not substantially different."

One-and-a-half years ago the CDU had advanced substantially more radical positions. At the end of its Leipzig Party Congress in 2003, the party agreed almost unanimously on the introduction of a lump-sum payment system for health insurance—a radical break with Germany's hundred-year-old system based on solidarity. Instead of paying a certain percentage of earned income, every insured person—rich or poor—would pay the same sum. The free insurance of family members was to be eliminated.

Prior to the congress, in October 2003, Angela Merkel made a speech to the CDU's Konrad Adenauer Foundation in which she explained that she would not recoil from the "discussion about impositions, cuts and reductions."

Immediately after the CDU congress, however, dissenting voices emerged—in particular from the CSU which feared for its broad majority in

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its bastion state of Bavaria. In negotiations between the two sister parties a compromise was then reached which restricted the lump-sum scheme with numerous special arrangements, watering down the original concept. The latest election program retains the lump-sum scheme (now named the "solidarity health premium"), but no time limit has been given for its introduction.

The tax concept developed by Friedrich Merz, the financial expert of the CDU, has also been knocked into shape within the Union. Merz resigned from all party offices, including his post as vice-chairman of the parliamentary group, last October because—at least for the time being—he saw no chance of being able to implement his radical conceptions.

The origins of the internal conflicts within the Union reside in the history and social composition of this alliance. It was cobbled together after the Second World War as a mélange of various parties that had miserably failed in the Weimar Republic. As a result the most varied of political conceptions are represented in its ranks—from classical conservatism to neo-liberalism, all the way to Catholic-based social policy.

Its social composition is also extremely heterogeneous. While its most important basis is to be found among small businessmen and the predominantly rural lower middle class, it is also the party of finance capital and possesses a substantial workers' fraction.

With deep roots in the countryside, the party is particularly shaped by the longstanding federalist tradition in Germany, which is crucial to the structure of the federal republic. The prime ministers heading Germany's states have strong personal power bases and are broadly resistant to central control. Merkel was elected to the party chair and as chancellor candidate of the Union by a large majority, but unlike her predecessor Helmut Kohl she lacks the connections and power base to be able to impose her line on the party.

Kohl needed decades to neutralize his opponents inside the party and establish the close network of dependencies and relations which finally established his unquestioned control of the whole party. Merkel does not even have control of her own regional organization, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, let alone the federal CDU. In the final analysis her rise to prominence is based on her role as the lowest common denominator in the struggle for power between rival state leaders.

The contradictions within the Union are so pronounced that Merkel could not afford to allow discussion of the election program in the party committees. Most decisions were made in secret by herself and CSU chairman Edmund Stoiber. The 38-page document was then put to paper by Merkel's close confidante Norbert Röttgen and CDU General Secretary Volker Kauder, together with Stoiber's head of chancellery in Munich, Erwin Huber, and the general secretary of the CSU, Markus Soeder.

Meanwhile, Merkel desperately tried to prevent CDU leaders in the German states and Stoiber from publicly making new suggestions for the election program. She was so distrustful that she was only prepared to report verbally on the program's content to the party presidium just one week before the presentation of the finished document. Merkel was worried that individual members of the leadership could again go public with new proposed amendments. She finally secured the agreement of the party executive by making clear that any publicity of the differences inside the party would damage the Union's electoral chances.

There are increasing doubts in Germany's ruling circles about the wisdom of Chancellor Schröder's decision to call premature new elections. The election was seen as providing an opportunity for radical changes to the country's social systems after a wave of resistance to Schröder's Agenda 2010 had increasingly paralyzed the work of the ruling SPD-Green Party coalition. Hopes were placed in a large parliamentary majority for the Union and the free-market FDP (Free Democratic Party), or—a less probable alternative—a new mandate for the SPD and the Greens.

Increasingly, however, the result of the election points towards a stalemate. Recent opinion polls give the Union and FDP just a one percentage point lead over the SPD, Greens and the newly formed "Left Party." Schröder and other prominent SPD members have categorically excluded any coalition with the Left Party.

A Union-FDP government with a very small parliamentary majority, however, would be barely more effective than the current coalition. The internal contradictions of the Union would inevitably resurface. Thus, *Der Spiegel* warns: "Koch, Wulff [CDU prime ministers in Hesse and Lower Saxony] and their friends will not openly work to undermine Merkel. However, they would not come to her aid should she get into difficulties. None of the powerful prime ministers in the west owe any loyalty to Merkel."

And the newspaper closest to the Greens has expressed its concern over the possible failure of an unprepared Union-led government which takes power too quickly. *Taz* writes: "Following the profound disappointment of the electorate with Schröder's policies it would have unpredictable consequences for the political system as whole if a chancellor Merkel reproduced the same sullen mood as her predecessor within a short time.... Should Merkel fail before the SPD recovers then the situation is beyond help. In the most favorable case the country would be plunged into a deep depression, in the most unfavorable into a panic situation, which could open up the way for populists who are far more dangerous than Oskar Lafontaine [leader of the Left Party]."

Another political constellation which has once again become the source of speculation is a possible grand coalition of the Union and the SPD. Recently, business consultants such as Roland Berger have called for such a coalition in order to impose unpopular measures by temporarily excluding any parliamentary opposition. But in the meantime there are warnings that a grand coalition which came about as the result of an inconclusive election and facing the task of imposing unpopular measures would be busy mainly in "mediating and moderating its own internal contradictions" (*Die Zeit*).

The ruling elite is increasingly aware that a change of government by itself is not sufficient to resolve pressing political and economic tasks posed by the international situation. In order to break the broad and deeply rooted resistance against social inequality and welfare cuts, new methods of rule are required which represent a fundamental break with postwar traditions based on broad social and political consent.

In his statement justifying the dissolution of the Bundestag, Federal President Horst Köhler invoked a virtual national state of emergency declaring that "Our future and that of our children is at stake." This must be understood as a warning. The proclamation of an emergency situation in order to justify undemocratic measures has a definite tradition in Germany.

The massive rearmament of state forces, including the demand for internal employment of the German army made in the election program of the Union and partly in the program of the SPD, should also be seen in this connection. The huge attack on fundamental democratic rights introduced in the name of the "struggle against terror" is directed in the long run against working people in Germany itself.

The dispute over the election program of the Union also makes clear that the ruling class continues to rely on the support of the SPD. Without seven years of the SPD-Green coalition, the Union would not have dared to present such a right-wing program for its election campaign. If former chancellor Kohl had tried something similar in the Bundestag election of 1998, when the SPD and the Greens came to power, he would have suffered an even greater defeat at the polls.

Agenda 2010, the Hartz IV laws, anti-terror legislation and the global stationing of German troops—all the measures introduced by the Schröder/Fischer government—have created the conditions for the Union

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to return to power and provided fertile soil for their policies. There can be no doubt that the SPD and Greens will continue to support such measures in future—either in government or as official opposition. According to press releases, sections of the SPD leadership are already keen to form a “grand coalition.” Against a background of growing global competition and increasing international conflicts, the entire political establishment in Germany is shifting even farther to the right.

Under these conditions, the Left Party led by Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine plays a definite role: attempting to give the ruling class time to make the necessary changes. The Left Party diverts discontent over the social situation by loudly declaiming Hartz IV and the Agenda 2010. It strictly refuses, however, to challenge the existing capitalist system. It lulls the electorate with the illusion that it is possible to return to the policies of social reform prevalent in the 1970s—through pressuring the main parties with a strong parliamentary opposition.

The ruling elite, however, is not prepared to change course because of a few speeches by Gysi and Lafontaine. This elite determines the political course of the government, and not the slogans and promises made in election programs. This is patently clear after seven years of the SPD and Greens. Only a broad mass movement, embracing the entire European working class and directed towards challenging the capitalist system, can stop this lurch to the right. However, such a movement is the last thing the heirs of the East German Stalinists and the trade union bureaucrats in the Left Party want.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing its own candidates in the Bundestag election to politically prepare such a movement on the basis of an international socialist program.

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