

German elections: Conservative opposition meets in Dortmund

A repulsive and reactionary spectacle

Ulrich Rippert
7 September 2005

The congress of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) which took place during the last weekend of August in the city of Dortmund marked a new stage in the general political decline which marks the current election campaign in Germany.

Over 10,000 CDU supporters gathered in the largest indoor arena in Dortmund, in a spectacle which included more “party cattle” than ever before, as one newspaper commented. Before the meeting started, free beer was handed out in tents and visitors could acquire orange-colored t-shirts, pennants and badges inscribed with the nickname of the party chairman—“Angie” [Angela Merkel] and “Vote for a change!” Inside, rock music blared out as acrobats and dancers pranced across the stage.

At intervals the prime ministers of the ten German states ruled by the conservative CDU-CSU (Christian Social Union) delivered short statements packed with banal clichés. One after another praised CDU chancellor candidate Merkel as the shining hope and savior of Germany. One moderator eulogized: “Angela Merkel—our hope, the solution, the future for our country” while the party faithful bellowed: “Angie! Angie!”

Loudspeakers droned the theme song “We are the champions,” and the hall was bathed in the bizarre light of an oversize laser lightshow, as the conservative candidate for the post of chancellor took the stage along with a train of her supporters. The din from the ranks swelled to a deafening noise lasting several minutes. Angela Merkel rose several times from her place in order to acknowledge the clamor—in a fashion similar to the kind of mania which takes place at American party conventions.

This repulsive charade, recalling past periods of political mass hysteria, served above all to dull any serious political thought while at the same time

mobilizing the most reactionary political forces.

A government under her leadership will be characterized by “a renewal of the fatherland,” Merkel declared in her 50-minute congress speech. Before her, the Bavarian Prime Minister and CSU boss Edmund Stoiber had already lectured the audience over “basic conservative values such as homeland and patriotism.”

Merkel stressed her rejection of European Union membership for Turkey and justified this with the fact that the admission of the country’s predominantly Islamic population would make excessive demands on the European Union. She tried thereby to take the wind from the sails of Roland Koch, the representative of the right wing of the party. Koch had demanded an aggressive election campaign with central priority given to the Turkish question. He reminded the audience that he had won elections for the state parliament in Hesse six years previously with a racist campaign based on opposition to proposals for dual nationality for citizens of foreign origin.

Every other sentence by Merkel was greeted with calls of “Angie, Angie” and rhythmic applause. The applause continued when she confirmed her intention to raise the value-added tax by the end of year and described CDU plans for loosening existing protection for workers against dismissal. Based on the manic political mood of the meeting, the audience—including many who themselves will shortly be affected by the drastic social cuts introduced by a CDU-led government—were prepared to applaud everyone and everything.

This became clear following the storm of applause for Paul Kirchhof, described at the congress by Merkel as a “finance policy visionary” and greeted by Stoiber as a “stroke of luck for Germany.” The independent tax expert, who was formerly a judge at the Federal

Constitutional Court and now holds a professorship in Heidelberg, has been appointed as specialist for financial and budgetary policy to the so-called “competency team” of the CDU.

More than any other individual in the conservative leadership Kirchhof embodies the swing to the right by the CDU/CSU towards an aggressive, neo-liberal policy which orients unreservedly to the interests of a privileged elite and international financial markets. While the CDU election program plans aims at reducing the tax rate for top earners by three percent, Kirchhof plans to go much further with a radical overhaul of the entire tax system. Under the last CDU/CSU government of Helmut Kohl, seven years ago, the top rate of tax stood at 53 percent. It has been already significantly lowered by the current Schröder-Fischer government (Social Democratic Party [SPD]-Green Party), to 42 percent.

Kirchhof wants to lower the top tax rate as quickly as possible to 25 percent and abolish all tax concessions available to broad layers of the population and the poorly paid—write-offs, travel costs, tax exemption for night work, etc. The introduction of his uniform “flat tax” would rapidly accelerate the process of wealth redistribution from the poor to the rich which has already been taking place for years. Commuters and nightshift workers would have give up tax benefits in order to finance tax rewards for the better-off and the super-rich.

Doing away with Germany’s progressive tax system would be the final nail in the coffin of the country’s “social free-market economy,” which was propounded after the Second World War by CDU finance minister and later chancellor Ludwig Erhard and defended in principle—despite all the existing social cuts—by both the CDU/CSU and the SPD.

In order to understand the extent of the rightwing turn of the CDU and CSU carried out behind all the acclaim and jubilation at the Dortmund, it is necessary to take a look at the past. The prevailing principle in the postwar German social security and tax system was based on “solidarity,” i.e., those with a higher income were asked to contribute more than those on lower incomes. Major social problems—such as illness, unemployment and retirement—were to be dealt with on this basis.

Contributions towards social security therefore depended on individual income, while all those insured were entitled to the same benefits—irrespective of their level of contribution. Families benefited in particular as marriage partners and children could be co-insured free of charge. According to the “parity principle,” employers

and employees made equivalent payments towards sickness, pensions and unemployment insurance. The basic form of this kind of national social security had already been introduced in the 1880s by Germany’s first Reich chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who sought to stabilize social conditions.

The CDU had already decided to put an end to this tradition at its Leipzig party congress in 2003. The decision at that time to finance health insurance by a lump sum contribution by the insured (169 euro per month), irrespective of income level, is now to be supplemented by the planned abolition of progressive taxation. Both measures are aimed at relieving the rich and super-rich and burdening working people with all the costs of social problems.

Many municipalities have already been bled of finances and are warning that declining tax revenues will lead to a complete collapse of social services in many regions. In other words: the “Angie” festival in Dortmund was aimed at providing the stage for the launching of a thoroughly reactionary and anti-social political course.

Two points should be born in mind with regard to the Dortmund congress:

Firstly: the CDU is determined to use any and every type of propaganda and demagogy in order to implement a policy that is directed against the interests of the broad majority of the working population. The kind of hysteria on show in Dortmund gives a foretaste of how a future Merkel government will seek to mobilize backward and lumpen social layers.

Secondly: responsibility for the shameless manner in which the most reactionary political forces could sport their new slogan—“Enrich the wealthy!”—lies with the SPD and the Greens. Following 17 years of CDU government, the SPD and Greens came to power in 1999 and rapidly managed to dash all hopes of any improvement. In fact Schröder-Fischer bragged about their policies of social cuts and military deployments. Now, against a background of growing popular opposition to their policies, the Social Democrats are preparing to hand political power over to a CDU running on the most right-wing program in its history.



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