

# German election result causes consternation in the French political establishment

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The failure of Angela Merkel to achieve a decisive breakthrough for the conservative Christian Democratic Union in the German general election has come as a profound shock to the entire French political establishment. The opposition of the German working class to the imposition of neo-liberal policies and the dismantling of the welfare state is a continuation of the same resistance shown in the rejection of the European constitution by 55 percent of the French voters on May 29 of this year.

The rebound by the SDP from a result projected at far below 30 percent in opinion polls shortly before the ballot, was due, not to a growth in approval for its record and programme, but to an attempt by voters to find a means of hitting at Merkel's continuation and deepening of precisely that record and programme.

The French political élite sees the German result as a severe setback for its plans for a frontal assault on the rights and living standards of workers. This is most frankly and lucidly expressed by François Fillon, one of Nicolas Sarkozy's firmest supporters on the right of the ruling UMP. In an interview on radio Europe 1 on September 19, he characterised the German election results as "extremely serious." He said, "In the two driving forces of European construction [France and Germany], we have a real crisis of confidence in the institutions, in the traditional parties of government.... These two countries, which have led Europe, who have had a commanding position in the world economy, are bearing the full brunt of globalisation and are behind in implementing the reforms which would enable us better to resist it." He added that Gerhard Schröder's policies were "already very liberal [i.e., in the European sense of the term, extreme free-market]," correctly recognising that the election result was a rebuff to the entire German political class.

Fillon, as minister in the former UMP government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, unflinchingly pushed through changes in collective bargaining and the reform of the pension system in 2003, the most serious of the measures against workers' rights carried out by that government. As Nicolas Sarkozy made his bid to replace the Gaullist old guard around President Jacques Chirac and to transform the UMP into a mass right-wing populist party, Fillon sided with him. When, after the failure of the referendum, Raffarin was replaced as prime minister by

Chirac's nominee Dominique de Villepin, Fillon was removed from the cabinet. He declared that this would free him to work full-time for the success of Sarkozy.

The government of de Villepin, now tipped as Chirac's *dauphin*, or designated successor, and the probable rival candidate versus Sarkozy for the UMP nomination for the presidency in the 2007 elections, is embarked on a programme of serious attacks on rights and conditions of workers. It has just issued instructions to unemployment offices to withhold benefits to workers refusing jobs that they are offered: 20 percent for the first refusal, 50 percent for the second and 100 percent for the third—along with contracts permitting the unjustified sacking of workers over a "trial" period of two years—creating the conditions for the super-exploitation of workers by the employers.

Sarkozy was counting on a Merkel victory to push the axis of European Union politics sharply to the right with an unabashed, brutal dismemberment of workers' rights, tax breaks for business and the rich, and an increasing reliance on police repression to control social discontent. This would give added impetus to his drive to turn the UMP into a mass right-wing populist party, and his goal of a Franco-German rapprochement with Tony Blair and George Bush led by himself and Merkel.

Sarkozy claims that his policies and his installation as president of France would create a *rupture*, or break, with the French egalitarian model. Rights should not be universal and acquired automatically, but gained on merit by work and only granted to the deserving, he declared at the close of the Young UMPers Summer School on September 3. He explicitly rejected equality as a principle of French political and social life, proposing "a model where levelling, egalitarianism, the thin spreading of resources, will no longer have a place, a model where work will be basic to everything.... [T]he republic is not giving everyone the same thing. The state's role is to render to everyone according their handicap and their deserts. It is through equity that we achieve equality."

This was an appeal to the most reactionary and backward forces within French society. It not only called for deeper attacks on workers' rights, and a further strengthening of the power of the employers and the state, but made an open attack on the ideology of the French state in repudiating the central

motto of the French Republic, the symbolic link with the Enlightenment and the belief in progress dating from the French Revolution: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”

French politicians make an open break with these aspirations, largely honoured in the breach by successive bourgeois governments, only if they wish to rally the forces of counterrevolution, forgo consensus politics and bourgeois democracy, and replace them with coercion and dictatorship. Sarkozy’s challenge to social consensus is on a par with Margaret Thatcher’s famous dictum: “There is no such thing as society, there are only men and women and their families.” The last régime to do this was that of Marshal Philippe Pétain, head of the Vichy regime that collaborated with the Nazi invader between 1940 and 1944.

The uninhibited neo-liberal declarations of Merkel’s economic adviser Paul Kirchhof contributed to the collapse of Merkel’s once apparently unassailable lead of more than 20 percent over the ruling SDP of Schröder in the opinion polls. This circumstance caused some of Sarkozy’s supporters to question the provocative style of his pledge to break with the traditional model of French politics. Patrick Devedjian, UMP deputy and Sarkozyite, said that the elections prove that “pedagogy” is needed. “The fiscal measures were distorted,” he said, referring to Schröder’s demagogic attacks on Kirchhof. He continued, “[F]or the UMP, this gives an indication about method rather than content.”

Hervé Mariton, a UMP free-marketeer, said of the German election, “It rings alarm bells on the theme of the *rupture*. People want ambitious acts from us, but they don’t believe in breaks that are too brutal.”

The right-wing *Le Figaro* complained, “Germany is paralysed.... By their refusal to make a clear choice, the German voters have compromised the cure for the most powerful economy of our continent. They are pushing the European Union into a long period of political immobility, at a moment when it was urgent to recover after the French no to the constitution.”

The editorial continued: “Those who are conscious of the need to modernise an economy incapable of creating jobs are roughly equal in number to those who refuse to pay the price. Those who want to reestablish good relations with the American ally are roughly equal in number to those who have an aversion to George W. Bush.”

The concern of the right wing about the alienation of the mass of the population and its active resistance is shared at all levels of the political establishment, as well as the fear that the ability of the German, French and EU bourgeoisies to compete on the global arena has been severely impaired by the failure of Merkel.

The centre-left *Libération* and the centre-right *Le Monde*, for decades dedicated to the maintenance of a consensual acceptance of the institutions of the Fifth Republic within the free-market European Union project, expressed the most shrill

anxiety and outrage about the rejection of the Constitution by the French people in the referendum. The tone is similar with the German election result.

*Libération*’s September 19 editorial voices fears of the political consequences of the possible formation in Germany of a “Grand Coalition”: “It is not necessarily an advantage for this country where the confusion of roles between the majority and the opposition, as elsewhere, can only nourish extremism of all varieties.... Germany is joining the club of nations where the capacity to harm of protesters and radicals blocks the regular functioning of alternating governments and paralyses long-term political programmes.” In line with the leadership of the Socialist Party, the editorial says that “it has been excessively claimed that the electoral programmes of the SPD and the CDU are identical” and then blames the new dissident left grouping the *Linkspartei* (Left Party), which took many votes from the SPD, for “handicapping the chances of the SPD.”

Pierre Moscovici, former minister for European Affairs in the Jospin government, leading member of the majority tendency of Socialist Party national secretary François Hollande, and campaigner for a “yes” vote in the referendum on the EU constitution, praised Schröder for having saved the SPD: “He pulled his party from the abyss. His leadership cannot be denied.” Moscovici claimed, “The responsibility of the Left Party is direct and complete in the failure of the left.”

Jean-Luc Mélenchon speaks for the Socialist Party “left” of ex-prime minister Laurent Fabius, Arnaud Montebourg and Emmanuelli, who called for a “no” vote on the EU constitution. He countered that “Schröder and his people alone are responsible for the disaster.” Having blamed Schröder, he immediately denied the implications of his statement and rejected the need to make a complete break with the “social liberals.” He urged unity with such purveyors of social austerity and neo-liberalism as Hollande and Jospin: “More than ever, we must avoid a split between the two lefts in France.”

*Le Monde* warns that “Germany is entering a period of uncertainty” and also blames the leaders of the Left Party, Oscar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, for “contributing to the failure of the centre-left” and to the ending of a situation in which “the German political landscape was stable for decades.”



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