

German elections: Vote Socialist Equality Party on September 18

**Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany)
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Even before polling stations open early Sunday morning, one thing is certain: regardless of how the electorate votes, the government that emerges from this election will be the most right-wing and anti-social in the history of post-war Germany.

The electorate's only choice is between a continuation of the coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, or a government comprising the Christian Democrats and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), under the leadership of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) chairperson, Angela Merkel.

If the latest voter surveys are accurate, neither camp will achieve a majority. Such an outcome could herald a grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and the SPD, or a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the FDP.

All of the possible ruling coalitions stand for policies that broad layers of the population reject.

During its seven years in office, the SPD-Green Party coalition has carried out the most far-reaching welfare cuts in the history of post-war Germany. The result is devastating: 5 million are officially unemployed, 6 million are in low-wage jobs. Wages and pensions are declining while the costs of health care and education are soaring. In the capital of Berlin alone, one in three children lives below the poverty line. Meanwhile, the international financial press praises Germany for slashing its labour costs.

The SPD-Green Party coalition has all but abolished the right of asylum, and fundamental democratic rights have been drastically curtailed within the framework of the country's anti-terror laws. The Social Democratic chancellor and his Green Party foreign minister have dispatched German troops around the world for the first time since World War II, and under their direction Germany is again openly and aggressively pursuing an imperialist foreign policy.

Chancellor Schröder took the unusual step of precipitating an early general election after his policies met with the resistance of broad social layers. He was reacting to mass protests against the "Hartz IV" labour reforms and the "Agenda 2010" welfare cuts, and to the massive loss of votes the SPD recorded in 11 successive state elections. Immediately following the SPD's defeat at the polls in North Rhine-Westphalia on May 15, he announced he would be seeking early elections to the Bundestag (federal parliament). He justified this to parliament by saying he could no longer count on a majority within his own parliamentary faction.

The early election is tantamount to an ultimatum by Schröder to the electorate: either you accept my right-wing policies or I will hand over the government to the Christian Democrats and FDP. The Federal Constitutional Court legitimised this manoeuvre in an interpretation of the constitution that conceded to the chancellor a legal novelty—the right to bring a "confidence motion directed at [the] dissolution" of parliament.

Since CDU leader Helmut Kohl lost the election of 1998, the Christian Democrats and the FDP have been transformed, moving sharply to the right. Supposed moderate figures from the Kohl era—like former

employment minister Norbert Blüm, former health minister Horst Seehofer and former CDU secretary-general Heiner Geisler—are today regarded as belonging to the extreme left wing of the CDU.

The new face of the CDU is that of finance expert Paul Kirchhof. The Heidelberg professor and former constitutional judge advocates a tax policy that has been implemented only in some of the Eastern European states that are marked by massive social disparities. He endorses a "flat tax," under which all income above €20,000 would be uniformly taxed at 25 percent. The highest tax rate would be halved, the progressive taxation of higher incomes would be abolished. The tax cuts would be financed by abolishing tax-free night-shift allowances, tax-deductible commuting expenses, and other concessions to wage earners—a gigantic redistribution of income from the bottom to the top.

This Social Darwinist concept of taxation, which harks back to the monetarist economist Milton Friedman, and which even US President Ronald Reagan considered too radical, is rejected not only by the unemployed and working class, but also by wide sections of the middle class. Following Kirchhof's appointment as finance expert to Merkel's election campaign team, the Christian Democrats have seen their poll ratings fall, while those of the SPD have risen. The expected CDU-FDP majority is melting away.

The disaster wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans has shown where such a political course leads. The link between the devastating consequences of a natural disaster that had been forecast for years and a policy that subordinates every aspect of society to market forces and the profit motive cannot be overlooked. The United States of America, constantly presented by the Christian Democrats as a model to follow, has been revealed as a country riven by deep social contradictions, unable to provide its citizens with even the most elementary protection.

In its election propaganda, the SPD has sought to capitalize on the opposition to Kirchhof. Whereas initially the SPD election campaign had sought to present Schröder as a steadfast reformer who was resolutely restructuring the welfare state, it is now seeking to portray him as its defender. Election posters that read "Have Confidence in Germany" have been replaced by those declaring "Vote SPD, so Germany Remains Social." New billboards denounce Merkel and Kirchhof as "radically anti-social."

This attempt to present the SPD as the lesser evil is both cynical and false. The SPD has not withdrawn a single measure from the hated Agenda 2010 and has presented no new policies to overcome mass unemployment and poverty. Schröder does not even consider it necessary to make a few cosmetic changes and bring a few new faces into his cabinet. Should his government be re-elected on Sunday, against all the forecasts, it would intensify its attacks on working people. There can be no doubt about this given the condition of state finances, rising oil prices and rapidly worsening international economic and political conflicts.

Although officially rejected, there are increasing appeals within the SPD for a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats. Despite the SPD's

election posters, in an interview with *stern.de*, Peer Steinbrück, whom the media has long regarded as a potential Social Democratic vice chancellor in a CDU-led regime, has openly called for a common government.

“On some central questions, a society like Germany needs cooperation across party lines,” he said, “especially if it concerns trailblazing and really long-term projects. This is the case with provisions for old age, nursing care, the health system, and federalism.”

Steinbrück belongs to those right-wing SPD functionaries who have always vehemently defended Schröder’s course and who display only contempt for the electorate and even their own party members. After he joined the SPD in 1969, Steinbrück’s political ascent was via numerous state and national party positions. He has only once faced an election—and he lost decisively.

In 2002, he inherited the office of state premier in North Rhine-Westphalia from the state’s outgoing SPD prime minister, Wolfgang Clement. When the elections to the state legislature were held in May of this year, he lost to the CDU, which for the first time in 39 years gained control of the state premier’s office in this former SPD stronghold. In the current election to the Bundestag, Steinbrück is not standing for election, even though he is seeking high government office.

If the election should result in a grand coalition, such a government would seek to implement and intensify Agenda 2010 despite massive public opposition. It would enjoy a two-thirds majority in the Bundestag and would not have to worry about passing legislation by a narrow parliamentary margin.

For all practical purposes, Agenda 2010 has already had the support of a grand coalition-type alliance. Numerous aspects of the Hartz laws and the health reforms have been supported by the Christian Democratic majority in the upper house of parliament.

Already some months ago, management consultant Roland Berger was pleading for a grand coalition, in order to push through further drastic attacks on social security benefits and employee rights. “In the beginning, this will not happen without a grand coalition, either in practice or one supported by the voters,” he said. “This only makes sense if the politicians agree on a programme beforehand that they will implement over two years, and then stand separately for election,” he added.

A grand coalition would move further to the right in the area of internal security, where the Greens and FDP have previously displayed reservations against a too-rapid dismantling of democratic rights, and in defence policy. It is no accident that two SPD ministers, Interior Minister Otto Schily and Defence Minister Peter Struck, are considered to be future cabinet members in such a government.

There has only been one grand coalition in the history of post-war Germany—from 1966 to 1969, under Chancellor Kurt George Kiesinger. At that time, the SPD entered a CDU-led government when it confronted fierce opposition from miners in the Ruhr opposed to pit closures. The grand coalition pushed through the mine closures and adopted emergency measures against widespread public resistance.

The overwhelming majority of the political and economic elite today are sceptical or reject a re-run of the grand coalition. They are concerned that the internal tensions within both the SPD and the Christian Democrats mean that such a government could prove too cumbersome to carry out the severe measures they are seeking. Moreover, they fear that a grand coalition could lead to a political radicalization. In 1966, as a reaction to the grand coalition, the “extra parliamentary opposition” developed, followed by the student revolts of 1968. The right-wing extremist German National Party (NPD) also experienced some spectacular election successes.

There are more far-reaching plans under discussion in the conservative opposition over how to deal with an unwanted election result. There are those who advocate that the Bundestag elections be repeated until “really clear relations” have emerged.

According *Leipziger* a *Volkszeitung* Angela Merkel with experts on constitutional law to discuss just such a proposal. They came to the conclusion that a newly elected Bundestag could be dissolved again if the formation of a majority required a grand coalition or a coalition with the participation of Germany’s recently founded “Left Party.”

According to this plan, Merkel would stand on three occasions in a vote in the Bundestag for the chancellorship. The first two ballots would require an absolute majority for confirmation as chancellor, but only a plurality would be necessary in the third and last, secret ballot. This would mean that Merkel could be elected chancellor even if the Christian Democrats and the FDP did not have an overall majority. According to Article 63, Paragraph 4 of the German constitution, the federal president would be then have the power either to confirm such a nomination within a period of seven days or dissolve the Bundestag and call new elections.

The *Leipziger Volkszeitung* quotes a Christian Democratic vice chairman who declares that should Merkel be elected chancellor in such a manner, she would be able to “open the way for really clear relations.”

In its calculations, the CDU is basing itself on the argumentation used by President Köhler to justify the early national elections. Köhler argued that new elections were permissible if the chancellor could “no longer meaningfully pursue a policy supported by a stable agreement of the majority.” According to the Christian Democratic vice chairman quoted in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, this would also apply if the election threatened to result either in participation by the Left Party in government or a grand coalition in the form of an “emergency coalition.”

On August 25, Köhler’s position was confirmed by the Federal Constitutional Court, and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) warned in a statement at the time: “In this way, the dissolution of the Bundestag is being linked to purely subjective criteria, completely independent of actual parliamentary majorities as determined by elections.... If the Bundestag majority does not agree with the policy of the chancellor, the chancellor can now dissolve parliament. In this way, he is handed a powerful lever to discipline parliament and intimidate fractious deputies.”

This warning has been confirmed more rapidly than could have been expected. Even before the new Bundestag has been elected, plans are being drawn up at executive levels of the CDU for its dissolution—until a result is reached which is compatible with the aims of the ruling elite. There could be no clearer expression of the complete disregard for the popular will on the part of the German ruling class. One inevitably recalls the admonition of the playwright Bertolt Brecht with regard to the East German Stalinist bureaucracy: “Would it not be simpler if the government dissolved the people and elected another?”

The affair casts a new light on Merkel’s own political origins in the east of the country, where she made her first political experiences as a secretary for agitation and propaganda for the Stalinist youth organization (FDJ) at a Berlin university. Elections in Stalinist East Germany were always used merely to confirm a political line which had been dictated by the bureaucracy. This is the model to be followed now in the Federal Republic against the background of an advanced social crisis.

The Left Party is playing a particularly insidious role in the process of preparing new attacks on working people. The party emerged after the election debacle for the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia in May this year and the subsequent announcement of early national elections by Chancellor Schröder. Soon after this announcement, long-time SPD stalwart Oskar Lafontaine announced his resignation from the party and declared his readiness to stand as a leading candidate for an alliance comprising the Party of Democratic Socialism (the successor organization to the SED—the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany) and the Election Alternative group.

In the course of the election campaign, the Left Party has raised many of

the concerns shared by large sections of the population. It has opposed the Hartz laws and tax reductions for the rich; it opposes foreign interventions by the German army, and much more besides. However, its stance is not to prepare the working class for coming attacks and conflicts, but rather to ensure that popular protest does not get out of control, take an independent political form and threaten the capitalist order.

In the east of the country—those areas with the highest poverty and unemployment—this has been the role of the Party of Democratic Socialism for some time. Where it shares government power, it supports welfare cuts; where it is in the opposition, it engages in social demagoguery.

Lafontaine encourages the illusion that if only politicians were willing, it would be possible to return to the social reformist policies of the 1970s. Again and again he has declared that the very existence of the Left Party will force the SPD, and even the CDU, to moderate their social policies. He then uses every demagogic election outburst by these parties to proclaim the confirmation of his thesis. Lafontaine has recently come close to publicly advocating a grand coalition.

On German television on September 8, he said that a SPD-CDU coalition would have “the advantage that fewer welfare cuts and a less ruthless assault on employee rights” would take place. “The stronger we become, the more likelihood there is of an SPD-CDU coalition,” he continued. “Under these conditions, the SPD and the CDU will be fearful of making further social cuts on their own. Then state elections are due, and therefore we do not need to have any fear of such an outcome.”

This is deception of the worst order! A government with such figures as Schily, Steinbrück and other members of the SPD right wing sitting at the same table as Merkel and Edmund Stoiber (leader of the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party of the CDU) will establish conditions in which it will be increasingly more difficult for the working class to oppose their policies. Such a coalition of forces would undoubtedly not only continue the process of cuts to the welfare system, it would also intensify the beefing up of the state and its armed forces.

In contrast to the 1960s, a grand coalition today will not be a transitional stage towards a government which undertakes reforms in education and the public services, as did the SPD-FDP coalition under Willy Brandt. At that time, German capitalism still had sufficient resources to finance such projects. Today the pressure of global competition no longer permits such a course. A grand coalition today would be a transitional stage to a much more authoritarian right-wing regime.

Should the working class be unable to prevent the coming into being of a grand coalition in the coming weeks, then at least it should be spared the illusion that such a regime would be “fearful of making further social cuts.” The Bundestag election in 2005 is the precursor to a new round of vicious social attacks and political conflicts for which workers must be politically prepared.

The electoral participation of the Socialist Equality Party is aimed precisely at such a preparation. We are participating in the elections in order to lay the basis for the building of a new party pledged to an international socialist program.

Unemployment, welfare cuts, the destruction of democratic rights, militarism and war can be fought only with a program which is directed against the foundations of the capitalist system and struggles for a society based on the principles of social equality and justice. In the age of globalization, not a single problem confronting workers in Germany or any other country can be resolved with the framework of national politics. As the German section of the Fourth International, we stand for the international unity of the working class and the United Socialist States of Europe.

In the four states where we are standing candidates—in Hessian, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony and Berlin—we call upon the electorate to vote for the PSG. In all other states we call for voters to make clear their preference for the PSG by writing the name of our party on the ballot

forms.

We reject the notion that the SPD or the Greens represents some sort of “lesser evil” to the CDU and FDP. All these parties advocate policies whose fundamentals have been developed in the executive suites of big-business associations and major finance houses. They may have tactical differences amongst themselves over how they can best implement their policies in the face of widespread popular opposition, but they are united in their basic aims. In this respect there can be no doubt that the SPD and CDU would be prepared to unite if necessary in a grand coalition.

Similarly, we reject any support for the Left Party. This organization unreservedly supports the bourgeois order. It seeks to revive illusions in the thoroughly bankrupt social reformist program of the SPD and provide a new home to SPD members should the SPD break apart following the election. The Left Party plays a decisive role in eastern Germany in restraining social protest—particularly in the two states where it is already in government.

Voting for the Socialist Equality Party represents an important first step in building a new, mass socialist party of the working class. We urge workers and young people to regularly read the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the Socialist Equality Party.



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