

What next after the German election?

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Ulrich Rippert, national secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party of Germany) and a member of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board, stood as a PSG candidate in Berlin in last Sunday's national election.

Immediately after the polls had closed on Sunday, wrangling began over the formation of a new government in Berlin. One proposal followed another regarding the next government, with ever-new political combinations being broached. But the most noticeable thing about the election result was the massive divide between all the parties presently haggling over forming a government and the working people, who make up the overwhelming majority of the population.

Six months ago, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party, SPD) called the early Bundestag (parliamentary) elections because he sought to overcome opposition to the social cuts contained in his government's "Agenda 2010" and "Hartz IV" measures. He was calling for a new mandate for his anti-welfare policies, threatening that otherwise the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) would come to power in a coalition with the "free market" Free Democratic Party (FDP) and push through even harsher social cuts.

But German voters have thwarted this ultimatum, at least for the time being. The outgoing SPD-Green Party government failed to receive a new mandate, but so did the alliance of the Christian Democrats and FDP, which had been widely expected to secure a clear electoral victory. Instead, the recently formed Left Party—a party that stood in opposition to the social cuts—won nearly 9 percent of the vote on its first outing, overtaking the Greens.

The fact that SPD and the Greens, together with the Left Party, have more seats in the new parliament than the conservative alliance of the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union (CSU) and FDP makes clear the extent to which the neo-liberal policies that seek to subordinate every aspect of life to the profit interests of the employers have been rejected by the electorate.

However, it would be an enormous mistake to believe that the anti-social attacks have been thwarted and a new government will adapt to the voters' verdict by moderating its policies. The political tug-of-war presently unfolding in the headquarters of the various parties is aimed at making out of the "unexpected mixture" (in the words of *Der Spiegel*) produced by the election a government that will carry out the right-wing policies demanded by big business. The captains of industry are insisting that such a government be quickly formed.

The multiplicity of government combinations presently under discussion—a grand coalition under the leadership of the CDU/CSU or the SPD, a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, a coalition of the CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens, or a CDU/CSU FDP minority government—makes clear that all of the parties are able to work with one another, since they all agree on the basic questions. The issue is not whether Agenda 2010 is carried out, but how.

The Left Party is an exception only to the extent that it does not want to be exposed in the first round of coalition talks. It seeks to preserve its ability to head off popular resistance and keep it under control. However, it is already signalling its readiness to cooperate with all and sundry at a

later date. Indeed, the Left Party is already in government at a regional level, and plays a critical role in maintaining social order.

The election last Sunday heralds a situation of increasing instability and will intensify the country's political crisis.

The question "What next?" is posed not just for the parties in the Bundestag, but also for the working class. In view of the sharp political changes to come, it is necessary to closely follow the present talks about the formation of a new government.

Schröder's triumphalist posture after the vote and his claim that the SPD's ability to close the gap with the CDU/CSU from 22 percent in June to just 1 percent on the eve of the election means there is popular support for his policies are utter nonsense. The voters did not say "yes" to Schröder but rather "no" to CDU leader Angela Merkel.

Behind Merkel were gathered the forces in German politics that would dearly love to administer "shock therapy"—brutally smashing up what remains of the welfare state and the social security system. Like the so-called "Chicago Boys" who pushed through the privatisations after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, they are fascinated by the US and the unrestrained orgy of self-enrichment that has taken place there for years.

They regard the fact there still remains a public health and pension system, which have so far eluded the clutches of the capital markets and private investors, to be a completely unacceptable restriction on the expansion of their stock portfolios and bank accounts. Their greed for private wealth is exceeded only by their irresponsibility towards the wider social community.

Angela Merkel's views differ only slightly from the new super-rich in Russia and Poland, who regarded Stalinism above all as an obstacle to their personal enrichment. She herself never had to pay a cent for her education, but this has not prevented her calling for the implementation of study fees and the privatisation of all social facilities in Germany.

Growing up in the former East Germany, where every independent movement of the working class was suppressed, she regards democratic structures only from the standpoint of how the interests of the elite can be imposed upon the population. On election evening, her indignation with the electorate's behaviour could be read in her face. How could a majority dare to vote against the express interests of the employers' associations and the advice of professional pundits and experts?

Her first statement after the election showed her conception of democracy. She would speak with all the parties represented in the Bundestag, Merkel told journalists, "but not with the Left Party."

For sheer insolence and contempt for the electorate, her statement is hard to beat. One does not have to support the opportunist policies of the Left Party or its leading figures Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi to demand to know what gives Merkel the right to refuse to hold discussions with a party that received more votes than the Greens—a party that she is assiduously courting. The Free Democrats, Merkel's partner of choice in forming a new government, received only slightly more votes than the Left Party.

Twenty-seven percent of voters in east Germany and a quarter of all unemployed voted for the Left Party. They are thereby excluded,

according to Merkel, from having any influence in the formation of a new government.

This attitude reveals the same disdain for those at the bottom of society, the long-term unemployed and the poor, as was shown by the Bush administration when it refused to send assistance and support to the people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck.

But Merkel is not the only one to hold such views. Schröder and Green Party leader Joschka Fischer have also announced they will hold no discussions with the Left Party.

The political conspiracy against the population could hardly be expressed more clearly.

It was precisely this arrogance and disdain for the poorest elements of the population that made many voters cast their ballot against Merkel and her finance expert Paul Kirchhof. The events in the US played a much more important role than most commentators have acknowledged. This is not surprising, since they often tend to view events from a narrow national perspective.

Millions of people in Germany watched with anger and astonishment as the government of the richest and most powerful nation in the world stood by as the hurricane devastated America's Gulf Coast. For days, hundreds of thousands of people suffered and many died, having been abandoned and left to their fate. When desperate and half-starved people sought food, police marksmen and special military units were deployed to protect private property. The plight of the population was then seized on as the pretext for a large-scale police and military operation to execute and test out civil war measures.

The close attention paid in Germany to developments in the US was shown in an article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* just one day after the Bundestag elections. Under the headline "Rough Times After the Hurricane," the author wrote: "It is not just that Katrina has exposed the fact that the power supply, transport systems and infrastructure of the world's largest national economy are ailing in many places.... Everywhere cash is lacking. There are big gaps in the training and education system in many of the poor districts of America's big cities. Poverty is growing. Forty-six million Americans have no health insurance. Even among the middle classes there are widespread feelings of uncertainty and social disorientation. But the US government seems to be blind to these problems. It desperately clings to the neo-conservative ideology that everyone is responsible for his own fate. Bush wants to overcome the hurricane disaster with old, useless prescriptions...."

Many people in Germany followed the events in New Orleans, understanding that they revealed where the policies of Merkel, Kirchhof and FDP leader Guido Westerwelle would lead them—and they articulated their opposition at the polling stations. But this does not resolve the issue. While the election expresses a move to the left within the population, the parties have reacted to the election with a clear move to the right. The readiness of the Greens to discuss cooperation with the CDU/CSU is a warning sign.

The working class must prepare for the fact that the new government—regardless of its composition—will push through severe social and political attacks. In this context, it is instructive to look at what is happening on the stock markets. Despite the election debacle for Merkel, the German DAX share index has remained largely unchanged. Short-term and relatively small losses were quickly recovered.

As a spokesperson for the Frankfurt stock exchange explained, investors are convinced that the important economic decisions are taken in company boardrooms, and that none of the possible governing coalitions would take "decisions against the market."

The meaning of this was made clear at the giant Siemens concern. Immediately after the election, the company announced it was cutting several thousand jobs at different locations. Heinrich von Pierer, for many years the boss of this technology company, and who resigned as company

chairman at the beginning of the year, functioned as an economic adviser to Angela Merkel in the election campaign. The company waited until the election before announcing the job cuts it had been preparing for some time.

In other words: von Pierer and his successor Klaus Kleinfeld make their decisions within the context of a political strategy. This means that the defence of jobs cannot be achieved through mere trade union protests, but requires a political perspective.

The most important task arising from the Bundestag election and the social and political attacks it heralds is the building of a new working class party that advances an international socialist programme.

This is the significance of the participation in the elections of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG). Our election manifesto began with the words, "We are participating in the election in order to lay the basis for the building of a new party that represents the interests of working people, pensioners, the unemployed and youth.

"We oppose the cuts in social spending that are supported by all of the parties represented in Germany's parliament, the Bundestag, and stand on a principle fundamentally opposed to that of the major parties: we say that the needs of the population must take precedence over the profits of big business and the employers. We strive for a socialist society based on the principles of social equality and justice. This is possible only through the international unification of the working class and the overcoming of all national, ethnic and religious divisions. Our goal is the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe."

The fact that the PSG won more than 15,000 votes in the four states where it ran candidates, and doubled its vote in the states of Saxony and Hessian as compared to the European elections of 2004, is of great importance. Unlike the European elections, in which the electorate is asked to vote for a parliament whose powers are extremely limited, in last Sunday's election voters felt that they had a direct stake in the outcome and therefore considered carefully the choices they made. Those who wanted only to protest against the policy of social cuts had the option of voting for the Left Party. The votes cast for the PSG embodied a more highly conscious turn to a socialist orientation.

As the party's leading candidate in Berlin, I would like to use this opportunity to thank those who voted for the PSG. Above all, I ask every voter to contact the Socialist Equality Party. In the coming weeks, we will be undertaking initiatives to engage in discussion with as many of our political friends and supporters as possible as to how they can participate in building the PSG and expanding the readership and influence of the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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