

Germany: After Dresden by-election, chancellor question remains open

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The by-election held in the Dresden 1 constituency on Sunday essentially confirmed the result of the German parliamentary (Bundestag) election held on September 18. The vote in the eastern German city of Dresden, two weeks after the main German election, was necessitated by the sudden death of one of the Dresden candidates prior to the September ballot.

According to German electoral law, each voter can cast two votes in a federal election: the first vote for a particular candidate, the second for a particular political party. In Dresden, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) won the direct mandate (first vote), and thus an additional seat in the Bundestag. However, the CDU and the “free market” Free Democratic Party (FDP) could only win a combined vote of around 41 percent in both the first and second votes, leaving the conservative parties a long way off from a majority.

The CDU candidate, Andreas Lämmel, won 37 percent of first votes, ahead of the candidates of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—32.1 percent—and the newly formed Left Party—19.2 percent. The FDP received just 4.7 percent of the vote and the Greens 3.9 percent. The long-time head of the extreme right Republicans, Franz Schönhuber, who stood as the replacement for the deceased far-right NPD (German National Party) candidate, played no role in the overall result, with just 2.4 percent of the vote.

As a result of the Dresden ballot, the CDU has won an additional mandate and has extended its lead over the SPD from three to four seats in the Bundestag.

With 27.9 per cent of the second votes, the SPD was able to overtake the CDU (24.4 percent) and won more than the Left Party (19.7 percent). The Greens obtained 7.1 percent and the FDP 16.6 percent. The larger result for the FDP on the basis of second votes is due to tactical voting on the part of many CDU supporters, who voted for their candidate in the first vote and then supported the FDP with their second vote. On the basis of an anomaly in German electoral law, the CDU would have actually lost a seat if it had received a large number of second votes in the Dresden ballot.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG (Socialist Equality

Party)—won a total of 196 votes in Dresden 1 (0.1 percent), and thereby increased its nationwide total to 15,620. The PSG put up a slate of candidates in 4 of Germany’s 16 states, including Saxony, the state in which the latest Dresden vote took place.

After the result of the Dresden vote was declared, both the CDU and SPD reaffirmed their claims to determine who takes over as chancellor. The general secretary of the CDU, Volker Kauder, declared that the voters had strengthened the claim by CDU Chairman Angela Merkel to the post of chancellor in a grand coalition government. “We rely on the reasonable forces in the SPD to realise this now,” he said.

For his part, the SPD chairman, Franz Müntefering, saw the position of his party confirmed by the result. “We are clearly the strongest force,” he said. He explicitly ruled out the possibility that the current chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), would declare Monday that he was dropping his demand to lead the next government, countering media speculation that he would make such an announcement. Following a meeting of the party leadership on Monday evening, Müntefering once again stressed that the SPD backed Schröder’s claim to the chancellorship in a new government.

Although the issue of who takes over as chancellor still remains to be fought out, the emergence of a grand coalition of the SPD and CDU appears ever more probable. Business associations and the media are exerting enormous pressure for such a “stable government” to be formed as soon as possible.

Following statements by Chancellor Schröder last week in favor of a grand coalition, the chairman of the Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU—sister party to the CDU), Edmund Stoiber, has also spoken out clearly for a grand coalition. There was no alternative to an alliance of the CDU and SPD, he said in a television interview on Sunday. “Other coalitions are not possible,” he said. Stoiber made clear his own interest in taking over the post of finance minister in such a coalition.

The chairmen of the FDP and the Greens also urged the

rapid formation of a grand coalition. FDP head Guido Westerwelle declared that he expected “the CDU/CSU and SPD to terminate this stalemate.” The Green chairman, Claudia Roth, called the Dresden election “a signal to the chiefs: now is the time to come to a decision.”

According to a report in the *Welt am Sonntag*, exploratory discussions held last Wednesday between the CDU and SPD already revealed “astonishing levels of unanimity over political content.” In particular, SPD head Franz Müntefering and the Bavarian prime minister, Edmund Stoiber, made efforts to demonstrate harmony.

Nevertheless, the fact that both parties continue to argue that they should decide the chancellorship issue—the CDU insists Angela Merkel will be the next chancellor, while the SPD is not prepared to back down on Schröder’s demand to keep the post—reflects more than just tactical maneuvering in the struggle for posts and influence in a grand coalition. It is an expression of violent conflicts and tensions within the ruling elite that could lead to a breakdown of the coalition negotiations, to new crises and unexpected developments.

A grand coalition would pursue policies that were rejected by a large majority of voters in the recent national election. It would continue and intensify the assault on living standards, social gains and democratic rights that was inaugurated by the Schröder government. There is broad agreement on this by all the major parties.

But the fact remains that the person who most clearly articulated this policy course, Angela Merkel, received a decisive rebuff in the election. Hopes that widespread anger against the SPD-Green coalition and political confusion would be translated into an easy victory for right-wing parties—as took place recently in Poland and at an earlier point in Italy and France—were frustrated. Against all forecasts, the CDU/CSU and FDP received a combined vote of just 45 percent, and in Dresden, 41 percent of the vote. That is the reason for the violent wrangling over the chancellorship.

Many influential figures are afraid that a Chancellor Merkel could rapidly exacerbate the conflict between the government and population as a whole, with opposition taking extra-parliamentary forms and radical parties increasing their influence. This is why there is increasing criticism of Merkel, including from inside the ranks of her own party.

As *Der Spiegel* reported recently: “Shocked by the miserable election result, ever more party colleagues of Angela Merkel are urging a change of course.” According to one CDU politician, quoted by the magazine, “We simply demanded too much of the voters,” while another stated that “the warmth was missing from our programme.” The executive committee of the CDU employee group (CDA)

concluded after a four-hour debate that Merkel had exhibited excessive ambition with regard to reforms.

There are also substantial reservations over Merkel’s foreign policy aims, which could undermine German interests in a period of increasing international tension by moving closer to the US and opposing European Union membership for Turkey.

These are the issues, and not just personal ambition, that are behind the conflict over the chancellorship. It has nothing to do with policies that are socially more “fair” or “left-wing.” On the basic issues—budget priorities, “reform” of the social system, further flexibility in the job market, the development of Germany as a military great power—all of the parties and their various factions are united.

The real issue is how to press ahead with these policies in the face of widespread popular opposition without provoking a premature confrontation. In this regard, the role of the SPD, with its close links to the trade unions, is crucial. The trade unions are avid supporters of a grand coalition, on the condition that such a coalition leaves intact the basis of their influence—collective wage and work agreements.

This was made very clear on the evening of the Dresden election in the TV programme “Sabine Christiansen.” The trade union representative who took part in the programme, the IG-Metall district head in Lower Saxony and Saxonia-Anhalt, Hartmut Meine, countered every demand for more flexibility on the part of workers by arguing that such flexibility was already possible, and, in fact, being implemented within the context of existing contracts—with the agreement of the unions. Meine expressed his complete agreement with another panel guest, Lothar Späth, the former CDU prime minister of the state of Baden-Württemberg, later the head of the Zeiss Company in Jena, and currently an investment banker.

At the moment, it is possible only to speculate on the outcome of the dispute over the chancellorship and whether the moves towards a grand coalition could collapse over this question. One thing, however, is clear: whether the future government is led by Merkel, Schröder or someone else, the working class must prepare for violent attacks and confrontation.



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