

2009 German parliamentary election: a conspiracy of silence on the implications of the economic crisis

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The federal parliamentary election that takes place every four years is regarded as the most important ballot in Germany. It decides not only on the allocation of seats in the German parliament (Bundestag), but also the composition of the future government.

Less than five weeks before the election is due to take place on September 27, however, the lack of any real political debate in the current campaign has become so pronounced that it is dominating political commentaries. The media complain about the boring election campaign and blame either the unwillingness of the acting chancellor to challenge her rivals, or the alleged apathy of the electorate.

The real reason lies elsewhere. All parties represented in the German parliament are united amongst themselves that the coming government must shift the burden of the international economic crisis onto the population. Nobody wants to address this issue, however, and openly state what the population can expect after the election. Instead, tawdry conflicts and banalities (such as the scandal over the health minister's personal use of a government car) dominate the election campaign.

There is a downright conspiracy to hide the true extent of the crisis and delay its worst consequences until after the election.

As the *Financial Times Deutschland* reported on August 25 with reference to several top corporate executives, there is a "kind of moratorium between industry and the government" to postpone major job cuts until after election day. As soon as the election is over, "German industry intends to implement massive job cuts." The newspaper concludes: "The admissions by managers only serves to confirm fears that the severest cuts for German workers have yet to come."

Similar comments were made by the former BDI employer federation chairman Olaf Henkel in a column in *Handelsblatt*. Henkel, who sits on the supervisory board of several large concerns, writes: "Immediately after the elections not only the consequences of the economic crisis, but also the self-made (i.e., government's) policy will lead to a drastic increase in the numbers of German unemployed." He accuses the government parties of not being prepared "to tell voters the truth now about the decisions which will be made in the next legislative period."

There is also a stony silence in the election campaign over the forthcoming cuts in social security. Only recently the grand coalition anchored a limit on debt in the German constitution, which forces every future government to reduce the country's rapidly growing budgetary deficit by ruthless budget cuts. The billions donated to the banks, the gaping hole in tax revenues and the increasing burden of social and welfare insurances payments are all to be clawed back at the expense of the weakest layers of society. However, not a word is said about this in the election campaign. Instead, hollow claims are made promising increased expenditure for education, social improvements and tax reductions,

promises which will all be immediately junked after the election.

The war in Afghanistan has also largely disappeared from the election campaign. Although the government has increasingly entangled the German army in a brutal war, which is expanding into a regional conflagration, there is no public debate. Defense Secretary Franz Josef Jung even refuses to describe the conflict as a "war." The real aims of the war—the imperialist subjection of a strategically important region—are being hushed up and denied.

The so-called opposition parties agree on all these questions with the grand coalition government parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The Greens supported both the sending of troops to Afghanistan and the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 when they were in government with the SPD, and remain fervent advocates of both policies. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) proposes even larger social attacks than those implemented by the grand coalition.

The Left Party is no exception. Officially it calls for the withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan and the abolition of the Hartz IV laws, but makes no attempt to mobilize in favour of these demands. Like chancellor Merkel, Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine refers favourably to Ludwig Erhardt and praises him as the father of the "social free-market economy." In reality, Erhardt was a right-wing CDU politician and an unwavering defender of the capitalist system. He was forced to resign as chancellor following a wave of miners strikes in 1966. The social gains achieved at that time were a product of workers' struggles against Erhardt. Such gains were won in the middle of the post-war boom and any repeat in the midst of the deepest crisis of the world economy since 1930 is excluded.

Although there are currently five parties sitting in the Bundestag, the programmatic differences between them are so small that in principle any one party could cooperate with all the others. None of them is prepared to challenge the power of the banks and major concerns, which are responsible for the economic crisis and are now already reaping in new profits and wealth. All of them are competing for the same narrow layer of voters—the wealthier sections of the middle class, which they describe as the "mainstream." The working population is largely excluded from playing any role in the election.

Four years ago CDU leader Angela Merkel and FDP leader Guido Westerwelle advocated a black-yellow coalition of their parties prior to the election. This was then frustrated by the election result, which failed to provide the two parties with a majority. This time Merkel has been much more circumspect and has declined to definitely commit herself to a coalition with the FDP.

Her stance is not just due to the fact that the election result is uncertain. According to current polls, a coalition of the CDU-FDP would secure a

narrow majority, but such polls are often unreliable (in 2005 they erred in their predictions by up to 7 percent) and approximately 40 percent of those surveyed remain undecided. More importantly there are doubts in sections of the conservative camp whether a CDU-FDP coalition would be able to contain increasing popular opposition and anger. Under a government consisting almost entirely of openly pro-business politicians, it would be much harder for the trade unions to rein in the working class. During the past 11 years the trade unions have played a vital role in the implementation of welfare cuts by suppressing any broad opposition—first under the SPD Schröder government and more recently under the Merkel government.

Several prominent conservative politicians have therefore called upon the FDP to tone down its neo-liberal rhetoric. Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU), who governs in Munich in a coalition with the FDP, threatened FDP leader Guido Westerwelle that he would encounter “the resistance of the CSU” if there were to be a “a neo-liberal onslaught after the election.” Similar comments came from the Saarland Prime Minister Peter Müller (CDU), who is up for re-election this weekend, as well as from his party colleague Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU) from North Rhine-Westphalia. Rüttgers, who also governs his state in a coalition with the FDP, is afraid, according to *Der Spiegel*, that “a storm of protest against a CDU-FDP alliance” at a federal level could cost him the state elections in North-Rhine/Westphalia due for May 2010.

Referring to CDU sources, *Der Spiegel* reports that chancellor Merkel would “most of all prefer a renewal of the grand coalition.... Further cooperation with the SPD would offer numerous advantages from the standpoint of the chancellor.” A grand coalition is guaranteed a clear majority in both houses of the German parliament—the Bundestag and Bundesrat. A CDU-FDP coalition would lack such a majority if the CDU fares badly in the imminent state elections. In addition, the coalition with the SPD has provided the government with the unhampered support of the trade unions, which implemented low-wage agreements, or—as the train drivers union Transnet did during the last rail strike—functioned openly as strike-breakers.

The SPD would also prefer to continue the grand coalition. After slipping in opinion polls to support levels of around 22 percent, and following the party’s ruling out at this point a coalition with the Left Party at a federal level, the grand coalition offers the only feasible prospect for the SPD to remain in government.

At the same time, a continuation of the grand coalition will inevitably lead to a continuing decline in support for the CDU and SPD—the two traditional so-called people’s parties in German politics. After 11 years in government the SPD is suffering from a chronic decline in membership and is registering its worst opinion poll results of the post-war period. And despite the high personal poll ratings for chancellor Merkel, the CDU has been unable to improve on its poor result in 2005. The party is currently polling at around 36 percent.

There are therefore intensified discussions on possible alternatives to the grand coalition. If there is a clear majority for the CDU-FDP on September 27, then a coalition of the parties—including the CSU—is likely. But the Greens, who for the first time in Hamburg entered a coalition with the CDU at a state level, have indicated their readiness to collaborate with the CDU and CSU. Programmatic issues would not prove a major obstacle for the former ecology party. The Greens make no secret of their close relations to influential business interests and vehemently defend the German army intervention in Afghanistan.

A key role in the considerations over future coalitions is played by the Left Party. If social conflicts continue to mount then the party will be needed. In those states (such as Berlin) and those municipalities in East Germany where it shares power, it has functioned as a reliable prop of the bourgeois order. Now, for the first time, it could enter government in a west German state.

The first such attempt by the party failed last year in the state of Hesse. Opponents inside the SPD sabotaged the attempt by the party’s state leader Andrea Ypsilanti to form a coalition with the Left Party and the Greens. They took advantage of the fact that prior to the election Ypsilanti had categorically excluded any cooperation with the Left Party. However, in the small west German state of Saarland, where elections are due to be held this coming Sunday, there is a good chance of the SPD, Left Party and Greens forming a joint state administration, just a few weeks before the Bundestag election.

The Left Party is particularly strong in the Saar due to the role played in the state by its leading candidate Oskar Lafontaine. Lafontaine led the SPD in the Saar for 19 years and governed the state as Prime Minister for 14 years before he took over the leadership of the federal SPD. Later he quit the SPD to help found the Left Party. According to opinion polls, the CDU and FDP combined are neck and neck with the combination of the SPD, Left Party and Greens. The SPD in the state has already made clear that it would immediately begin coalition negotiations with the Left Party and the Greens should the three parties outstrip the CDU and FDP. The federal SPD leadership has also given the green light for such a coalition.

There is also a good chance that a coalition of the Left Party, SPD and Greens could replace the incumbent CDU in the East German state of Thuringia, where elections are also being held this Sunday. State elections are traditionally a kind of litmus test for the federal election and the state election this Sunday could well influence the result on September 27. The SPD has categorically excluded a coalition with the Left Party for the coming legislative period but is keeping its options open thereafter. It is also quite possible that the next Bundestag election could take place within less than four years if the economic and social situation continues to deteriorate.

For its part, the Left Party has made clear that it is prepared to go to any lengths in order to be recognized by the SPD as a governmental partner. In Saarland, Lafontaine has already drawn up a government team acceptable to the SPD and the Greens. In discussion as economics minister is university professor Heinz Bierbaum, with the former Green Barbara Spaniol as education minister and Volker Schneider, who worked for a long time in the Bundestag faction of the SPD, as labour minister.

In Thuringia, where the SPD is substantially weaker than the Left Party, the latter’s leading candidate Bodo Ramelow has indicated that he would allow the SPD to fill the post of prime minister. Such a step is unprecedented. Normally the party with the most electoral support fills the post of head of government in a coalition of parties.

Once in government the Left Party would operate in the Saar, Thuringia or at a federal level just as they have done in Berlin. In the German capital the Left Party has unreservedly supported all the cuts introduced by the SPD and ruthlessly implemented the harsh anti-welfare Hartz laws. The party’s most important task now is to strengthen the SPD, which is rapidly losing support because of its right-wing policies.

Even if the election result on September 27 remains open, one thing is certain: The coming government—irrespective of its composition—will shift the burden of the crisis onto the population. In order to defend itself and prevent such a disaster, the working class needs a new party. The building of such a party is the aim of Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), which is standing in the election with its own candidates.



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