

Germany: Incoming government prepares attacks on working class

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The results of Sunday's German federal election herald a period of intense social struggles.

Eleven years after the government of Helmut Kohl was voted out of office, a Conservative-Liberal alliance, far to the right of the Kohl government, is returning to power. Although only a third of those eligible to vote cast their ballots in favour of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU) or the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the incoming government has a comfortable 42-seat majority in the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament. This is due to the low voter turnout and 24 excess mandates resulting from an anomaly in German electoral law. In the Bundesrat, the upper house of Parliament, the CDU/CSU and FDP will have a majority as well, as a result of the recent state elections in Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein.

In the upcoming coalition talks, the FDP will be able to exert much more influence than when it was part of the Kohl government. Then, the number of CDU/CSU members of Parliament was six times that of the FDP, whereas now it is just two and a half to one. Thus, the party of big business and the privileged, in close cooperation with the business faction of the CDU/CSU, will shape the politics of the future government.

In a press conference Monday, big business circles, celebrating the election outcome, spelled out what they expect from the government – a declaration of war on the working class, forcing the population to bear the full brunt of the economic crisis, the consequences of which had been softened before the election by reduced working hours and stimulus packages.

Hans Heinrich Driftmann, chairman of the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DIHK), demanded the cutting of corporate taxes and estate taxes, more flexibility in the labour market and cuts in social spending. "It is time to review the budget. In a time of crisis, nothing is sacred," he said. Germany could no longer afford a guaranteed pension, as promised by the outgoing government.

The leading economic adviser to the government,

Wolfgang Franz, also demanded sharp cuts in social spending. "The federal government cannot evade cruel measures, especially if they want to fulfil their pre-election promise of reducing taxes," Franz said. Klaus Zimmermann, president of the German Association of Industry (DIW), said that an increase in the Value Added Tax (VAT) would be inevitable.

The majority of the commentary in the German and international press predicted that a government led by Merkel and Westerwelle will comply with the demands of big business.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in its business section, carried an article Monday, headlined "Howling and chattering of teeth. Difficult decisions confront the incoming government." And the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* warned: "The election results and the economic crisis rule out more compromises." The *Tageszeitung* commented: "It is easily foreseeable what Black-Yellow (the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition) will mean for us: less social spending, tax cuts for upper incomes which will be financed by an increase of VAT for all."

The *Hamburger Abendblatt* demanded that FDP leader Guido Westerwelle, instead of taking the post of foreign minister, assume responsibility for drastic spending cuts: "At a time when everything we were used to – with regard to the labour market, the income of executives, health care, security policy and pensions – has to be put to the test, Westerwelle should demonstrate courage and demand that a new super-department of Economics and Finance be established, with Westerwelle himself at the head of it."

The London *Times* wrote: "The clear victory in the election gives Merkel the opportunity to tackle unpopular issues, such as the German mission in Afghanistan." And the Copenhagen *Berlingske Tidende* wrote: "In a difficult period, the outgoing government has given a sense of security to the Germans through providing a closely knit economic security net. The task of the incoming government is to clean up; an ungrateful, but necessary task."

The working class has to prepare for intense conflicts that

it cannot avoid. To be victorious, it is imperative that it draws a political balance sheet.

The Christian Union-FDP coalition owes its return to power exclusively to the Social Democrats. When Gerhard Schröder (SPD) took the chancellorship from Helmut Kohl in 1998, the business papers complained about the (market) “reforms” having come to a standstill. Caught between contradictory social interests, the Kohl government lacked the strength to overcome working class resistance to these business-dictated “reforms”.

This task was taken on by the SPD – first under Schröder as chancellor in a coalition with the Greens, then as junior partner of the Christian Union. Tax cuts for companies and the highest income brackets, the Agenda 2010, the raising of the pension age to 67, the reform of the pension and health care system and numerous other measures – all this led to the destruction of the social conquests of previous decades and contributed to the creation of a huge low wage sector. There was a massive build-up of state surveillance, and the Bundeswehr (German army) was deployed in wars the world over.

The result is the almost complete collapse of the SPD. While its upper middle class constituency, led by Schröder’s Finance Minister Wolfgang Clement, voted for the FDP, millions of workers turned their backs on the party, in the midst of the deepest economic crisis. The SPD’s vote was the worst in the party’s history. Just one in six eligible voters cast a ballot for the SPD. In 1972, when its political influence had reached its height, it had the support of 40 per cent of the eligible voters. Since the SPD entered the federal government 11 years ago, it has lost 50 per cent of its voters.

Many workers and youth have lost confidence in the SPD. They have understood that its policies do not differ from those of the conservatives and the liberals, and that the party is opposed to them when it comes to social struggles. This is to be welcomed. It opens the way for the construction of a new socialist party.

The Left Party stands in complete opposition to this task. It tries to prevent any conclusions from being drawn from the decline of the SPD and does everything in its power to prop it up. It fosters the illusion that the SPD will be revived as an opposition party and hopes to collaborate with it. Its leaders promote a bloc with the SPD in parliament and coalition governments in the federal states of the Saarland, Thuringia and Brandenburg. “The SPD would be well advised to take away the majority from the Christian Union and the FDP in the Bundesrat step by step,” said Oskar Lafontaine, the leader of the Left Party. This is only possible in an alliance with the Left Party.

In reality, the SPD has already demonstrated that it will defend its Agenda 2010 policies even as an opposition party.

The election of Frank Walter Steinmeier to lead the party’s parliamentary faction demonstrates that. Steinmeier was Schröder’s right-hand man and masterminded the Agenda 2010 policies.

The SPD’s turn to the right is the outcome of its program, which unreservedly defends the bourgeois order and its underlying capitalist property relations. In times of economic upturn, the SPD employed the method of social compromise in order to stabilize bourgeois rule. In times of crisis, it defends the bourgeois order by brutally attacking the working class.

History demonstrates that the SPD has always lined up behind the ruling class when the bourgeois order entered a state of crisis. At the outbreak of World War I, it supported German imperialism by voting for war credits. In the November revolution of 1918, it allied itself with the army high command and suppressed the revolutionary workers and sailors. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, it supported Brüning’s emergency decrees, voted for Hindenburg to become Reichspräsident and paved the way for Hitler to take power. In the 1970s, SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt introduced harsh austerity policies, thus initiating a period of social reaction that continues to this day.

The rightward movement of the SPD is part of an international phenomenon. The British Labour Party, the Italian Democrats, the French Socialists and all the other social democratic parties have all moved far to the right, and no election defeat will deter them from continuing their rightwing course.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit was the only party in the general election that fought for a program that prepares the working class for the sharp class conflicts that are coming.

“The mounting economic and social crisis is affecting workers in every country and a social storm is gathering worldwide,” we wrote in our election manifesto. “We are setting out to politically prepare the working class for the inevitable resurgence of mass social struggles in Germany and throughout the world, and to provide a socialist and internationalist strategy to lead them to victory... Our aim, to build an independent political movement of the working class, can only be realised by breaking with the SPD and the Left Party and leading a rebellion against the trade unions.”



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