

Historic defeat for Social Democrats in German federal election

Stefan Steinberg
28 September 2009

The German federal election held Sunday produced a historic defeat for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a sharp drop in support for all of the parties involved in Germany's outgoing coalition government.

The SPD polled just 23.0 percent, down more than 11 percent from the last federal election in 2005, when the party polled 34.2 percent. The result is the worst ever for the SPD since World War II. Its decline of over 11 percent is the biggest loss ever recorded by a German party in a federal election since 1949.

The SPD's main partners in Germany's grand coalition government, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU), were also punished by voters. The so-called "union" parties emerged with the largest share of the vote—a combined total of 33.8 percent—but recorded their second worst result in postwar history.

The tally for the union parties was 1.4 percentage points less than their result of 35.2 percent in 2005, and far removed from the 40 percent-plus vote recorded in the majority of elections held in the postwar period. Many CDU-CSU voters evidently switched to the pro-"free market" Free Democratic Party (FDP), which polled 14.8 percent, a gain of 5 percentage points compared to 2005.

The Christian Social Union (CSU) also registered its worst ever result in a federal election since World War II. The party which has long dominated politics in Germany's biggest state gained just 41.0 percent in Bavaria—less than the disastrous 43.4 percent recorded by the party in the last Bavarian state election.

Even under conditions where voters turned away in droves from the conservative CSU, the SPD was unable to benefit. Instead, the SPD also recorded its worst ever result in Bavaria, receiving just 16.5 percent of the

vote.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of the CDU announced Sunday evening that she would form a coalition government with the pro-business Free Democrats. It is estimated that this coalition will control some 323 seats in the lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, giving it a majority of approximately 15 seats.

Under conditions where the electorate turned away from all of the parties involved in the CDU-CSU-SPD grand coalition, opposition parties were able to increase their share of the vote.

The Green Party won 10.6 percent, up 2.5 percentage points from 2005, while the Left Party won 12.5 percent, 3.8 percentage points higher than its result in 2005. Following the failure of a prolonged campaign by leading members of the Greens to orient the party toward participation in government at the federal level with Germany's main conservative parties, the Greens were able to profit from growing discontent with the grand coalition parties.

The Left Party was able to improve somewhat its result compared to 2005. In the course of the election campaign, the party made clear that it saw its principal role as foot soldier for the SPD. As a result, it was largely unable to benefit from the decline in support for the Social Democrats.

Voter turnout, at 71.2 percent, was sharply down from the 77.7 percent recorded in the 2005 election. The largest percentage of non-voters came from former SPD supporters.

The election outcome was above all a disaster for the SPD, which has stumbled from one election defeat to another. Following a string of defeats at the state level, the party recorded its worst ever election showing in post-war German history when it won just 20.8 percent of the vote in the European elections held in June of

this year.

Recent opinion polls had indicated a certain revival in the fortunes of the SPD in the run-up to election day, but Sunday's result confirmed that the electorate was not prepared to forget or forgive the SPD for its political record during 11 straight years in government at the national level.

Over this period the SPD, first in a coalition with the Greens and then as a member of the grand coalition, demonstrated its total subordination to the interests of big business and finance capital. It implemented the most radical cuts in the German welfare system since the war, while turning Germany into the world's second leading low-wage economy among the advanced industrialized countries (after the US).

Following Sunday's result, the SPD's leading candidate, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, told SPD supporters at the party's headquarters in Berlin that "the result is a bitter day for German Social Democracy, this is a bitter defeat." His words were echoed by SPD parliamentary fraction leader Peter Struck.

Steinmeier will lose his post as foreign minister. He is likely to be succeeded by FDP leader Guido Westerwelle.

Despite the scale of the defeat, both Steinmeier and party Chairman Franz Müntefering indicated that they would not step down from their leading posts in the SPD. When questioned by reporters, Steinmeier vehemently defended his party's anti-welfare Agenda 2010 policy and indicated that he would stand as head of the party's parliamentary faction.

The collapse in support for the SPD and the turn away from the other parties in the governing coalition has created the conditions for the rabidly pro-corporate FDP to return to power after 11 years in opposition.

In the year since the eruption of the international financial crisis, the FDP has proved to be the most consistent ally of the financial elite, rejecting even the mildest of measures aimed at restraining the major banks. A new government consisting of the FDP and CDU in Germany will be a government of open reaction and class confrontation.

Already, financial circles are baying for blood, demanding that the new government not lose a moment in implementing measures to shift the entire burden of the crisis onto the backs of the working population.

In the newspaper Bild am Sonntag, the chief

economist of Deutsche Bank, Norbert Walter, demanded "radical measures" with regard to state expenditure, and advised the incoming government to commence the implementation of sweeping new taxes on consumers.

The Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) ran candidates in two German states in order to raise the necessity of a broad popular mobilization on the basis of an international socialist program in response to the crisis. The PSG warned the working class of the conspiracy between the major parties to disguise the real extent of the crisis.

In particular, the PSG made clear that, under conditions where major political shifts were eroding the popular base of the traditional parties, the Left Party was being groomed to play a major role in holding back a new wave of class struggle.

The PSG received a total of 2,970 votes. In Berlin, where the party campaigned intensively, it received 1,423 votes. This is twice as much as in the 2009 European election and about the same as in the 2005 federal election and the 2004 European election.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the PSG received 1,547 votes, 100 more than in the 2009 European election.

The vote for the PSG was comparatively small. Nevertheless, it indicated that an important layer of working people and youth is becoming increasingly receptive to the international socialist perspective of the PSG and the World Socialist Web Site.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact