

German Greens to form coalition with CDU and FDP in Saarland

Ludwig Weller
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The right-wing trajectory of the German Green Party has reached a new level with its decision to form a so-called Jamaica coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) following elections in Germany's smallest state, Saarland.

At their recent party congress in the state capital of Saarlouis, the Greens voted by a majority of 78 percent to form a coalition with CDU and FDP, thereby rejecting their other possibility in the state—a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party.

This shift by the Greens came as somewhat of a shock for many supporters of the Greens, who had so far backed the party's right-wing course. The media also expressed their surprise at the readiness of the Greens to ensure that the standing state prime minister, Peter Müller (CDU), retain his post.

In the exploratory discussions held by the Greens—first with the SPD and the Left Party, and then with the CDU and FDP—it had become clear that all of the five parties basically agree on the key political issues. The vice-chair of the Greens parliamentary group, Willger-Lambert, stressed that in both sets of negotiations the party had been able to fully implement its “essential Green positions.” The Greens had then received “two nearly equivalent” offers from their potential partners.

The decisive impetus for the Greens to form a coalition with the CDU and FDP came from leading federal political circles. The CDU is determined to remain in power in Saarland at all costs, in order to strengthen the hand of the new CDU-FDP federal coalition. Retaining control of Saarland is vital in allowing the CDU and FDP to hold on to their majority in the upper house of parliament (Bundesrat) and allow federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) to “govern through,” as she puts it.

For this reason the CDU and FDP were prepared to make considerable concessions to the Greens in terms of posts in the new state administration. Although the Greens only won three seats in the state parliament, based on their 5.9 percent vote in the state election they will take over two ministerial posts in the new government—the education department and a new ministry for environment, energy and infrastructure.

Immediately after the election it appeared that a change of administration was likely in the state. The Left Party quickly reached an agreement with the SPD and the Greens, then indicated they were prepared to enter a coalition with both parties. In the election itself voters had turned their backs on the sitting prime minister, Peter Müller (CDU). The CDU share of the vote fell to 34.5 percent—insufficient to allow it to form a coalition with the FDP, which obtained 9.2 percent. The SPD also lost much of its support and

received just 24.5 percent of the vote, while the Left Party and its candidate, party chairman Oskar Lafontaine, notched up 21.3 percent. Lafontaine began his political career in Saarland and was state prime minister for many years, at that time as a leading member of the SPD.

Nevertheless, the Green Party alliance with the FDP and CDU did not come out of the blue. The federal leader of the Greens, Cem Özdemir, has been aiming to form an alliance with the CDU for some time and declared the decision made by the Greens in Saarland to be a great victory—the logical consequence of programmatic agreement. Özdemir told German radio (Deutschlandfunk), “I have witnessed and experienced a number of coalition agreements. But what we have been promised there is unprecedented.”

The Green Party federal executive manager, Steffi Lemke, also firmly backed the head of the Greens in Saarland, Hubert Ulrich. Lemke told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “That is a courageous decision, which should be tested in practice before being denounced.”

Other Green leaders were more circumspect in their comments. The chair of the party's parliamentary group, Renate Künast, declared, “That has an experimental character for Saarland. Nothing more.” And no less a figure than Daniel Cohn Bendit, who has been striving in France to establish an alliance of the Greens with the Socialist Party and the MoDem movement led by François Bayrou (which is similar to the FDP), compared the Saar state leader Hubert Ulrich to a “Mafioso.”

In Saarland itself a considerable section of the Greens, which has a membership of just 1,000 in the state, had earlier expressed their support for a Jamaica coalition. A statement by the Greens in Homburg read, “The CDU, FDP and also the Greens in the state are now called upon to forge a coalition of the center.” One of the slogans of the Greens in the state election campaign was to “cold-shoulder” the head of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine.

One can therefore safely assume that the decision by the Greens in Saarland for a Jamaica coalition had been authorized by the party leadership at a federal level. The decision is a clear signal by the Green Party leaders that they ready and willing to enter a coalition at any time with the CDU and FDP at a federal level.

The Greens had already formed a coalition with the CDU in the city-state of Hamburg in February 2008 and have since supported measures that they had previously condemned. At a local level the Greens have formed dozens of coalitions with the CDU in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

At the party's Erfurt congress in the autumn of 2008, the newly elected Green chairman, Cem Özdemir, had argued in favor of more alliances with the CDU and FDP. After his election he said, “In individual cases it could well be easier to implement Green demands

with black [the party colors of the CDU] rather than red [party colors of the SPD and Left Party].” In addition, Özdemir stressed that the Greens had nothing to be ashamed of for their participation in the federal coalition with the SPD (1998-2005) and expressly supported that government’s anti-welfare measures (the Agenda 2010) and military intervention in Afghanistan.

The latest developments in Saarland confirm that there are no basic political differences between the conservative parties—the CDU, Christian Social Union and FDP, on the one hand—and those parties misleadingly described as “left,” i.e., the SPD, Greens and Left Party, on the other. In the wake of the economic crisis all of the German parliamentary parties have moved to the right and orient their politics to the demands of the banks and business federations. They all support the state and are determined to defend the capitalist system at the expense of the social interests of the broad population.

All of the parties in Saarland were agreed on this. At the heart of the “equivalent offers” submitted by the CDU, FDP, SPD, Left Party to the Greens was the necessity for a strict austerity program. All agreed that the future government must adhere to the recently introduced “debt brake,” which limits the amount of debt the state can amass. The resulting spending cuts will inevitably be made in the sphere of social expenditure and jobs (including cuts to jobs in the state’s mining industry).

The Left Party has also expressed its backing for the closure of coal mines, although no provision for alternative jobs exists. In this respect the Left Party has made an important concession to the Greens and FDP, who would like to close down such companies as Opel autos as a “market-cleansing” measure, or on the grounds that such concerns are “detrimental to the environment.”

In his exploratory discussions with the SPD, Left Party leader Lafontaine had stressed the “devastating” budgetary situation in Saarland. The central point of the discussions was the difficult financial situation for the state, which has been intensified by the state’s steep decline in revenues. The chairman of the SPD in Saarland, Heiko Maas, who had hopes of becoming the state’s future prime minister, said after the meeting, “We are broadly in agreement in terms of content on those issues we addressed.”

The concessions made to the Greens by the CDU and FDP in Saarland mean little in terms of any new political direction. The CDU in Saarland has said it is prepared to consider withdrawing from nuclear power, but how much is such a promise worth when the CDU at a federal level is planning, together with the FDP, to extend the life of nuclear reactors? The CDU has also declared it will contemplate the reversal of education fees in the state, but this promise is also questionable given the “debt brake.” Even if the measures were introduced, then the hole in the state budget would be filled by cuts in other areas.

At a federal level the government has announced a number of cosmetic changes to policy, but these will quickly be dumped. Then, when the new government begins to shift the entire burden of the financial and economic crisis onto the shoulders of the broad masses of the population, it will be able to rely on stable majorities at both a federal and state level. This situation is in considerable measure thanks to the Greens in Saarland, and also the SPD in the state of Thuringia, which also—surprisingly—has agreed to form a coalition with the CDU.

The future federal government will also be able to rely on the SPD and the Left Party in order to implement its attacks on the population. This is clear from the events in the state of Brandenburg where the

standing SPD Prime Minister Matthias Platzeck has decided to quit his decade-long coalition with the CDU in favor of an alliance with the Left Party.

Platzeck’s argument for his change of partner is highly revealing. During the election campaign he had praised his long time cooperation with the CDU as “very successful and based on a spirit of mutual trust” and had reached an agreement with the CDU in exploratory discussions. Then, however, to the anger of the CDU, he decided to change horses and coalesce with the Left Party—a decision that Interior Minister Jörg Schönbohm (CDU) described as “betrayal.”

Platzeck has different ideas. He was united with his CDU colleagues over the necessity for a tough round of economic measures and welfare cuts, but considers the Left Party as a far better partner when it comes to imposing such measures on the working population. He made no bones about his conviction that an SPD-Left Party alliance would be best able to implement the difficult decisions confronting the state.

According to the *Berliner Morgenpost* (October 16), the SPD and Left Party in Brandenburg have agreed in principle on an extensive job reduction package for the next five years. The SPD wants to slash 10,000 jobs in the state administration by 2019, i.e., a fifth of all such jobs. Platzeck has also announced a drastic austerity course for the future “red-red” government in a range of other areas.

Platzeck, who is a firm defender of the Agenda 2010 program and the anti-welfare Hartz IV legislation, quite correctly referred to the reliability of the Left Party in its coalition with the SPD in the German capital Berlin for the past eight years. During this time the Berlin Senate has carried out an unprecedented series of attacks on jobs and social services in the capital. The cuts carried out in Berlin go much further, in fact, than those carried out in German states governed by CDU-led administrations.

It is no accident that the notorious Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) dictated economic policy for many years as finance senator in Berlin. Having taken up a new post at the German Central Bank, Sarrazin recently launched a vicious racist attack on foreign workers in Germany. His extreme right-wing and provocative remarks say more about the attitudes tolerated in the coalition of SPD and Left Party than all programmatic declarations of the Left Party.



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