

German state election reveals an all-party coalition against the population

Ulrich Rippert
30 April 2010

The election to the state parliament in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) on May 9 is already having national repercussions. The parliamentary election in Germany's most densely populated state has traditionally pointed to political trends at a federal level. Attention to the election, however, is particularly pronounced this year because the main issue, according to political commentators, is how to make substantial political "new adjustments" at a federal level.

The backdrop to the election is the rapidly developing economic crisis. The sorts of drastic social attacks dictated to the Greek government by the German government and the banks must also be implemented in Germany. The plans currently being drawn up to wipe out social gains far exceed the attacks contained in the notorious anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and Hartz laws.

Leading representatives of business federations and the financial elite regard the current coalition government in Berlin elected a half year ago as too weak to implement the planned welfare cuts against anticipated popular opposition. This also applies to NRW, where a similar coalition of conservative parties and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) has already been in power for the past five years.

The verdict on the federal government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) by business leaders is scathing—although such a constellation was regarded as the ideal choice by the same lobby six months ago. In particular the FDP is a shadow of the party once led by Otto Graf Lambsdorff, who enjoyed close relations with the most powerful figures in high finance. Since being taken into the current coalition, the FDP has hit the headlines with a series of dubious political practices bound up with appeasing their business cronies, leading in turn to increasing political instability. According to the German finance paper *Handelsblatt* last week, no other party in German history has lost the confidence of the business community so rapidly as the FDP led by Guido Westerwelle.

The conservative CDU and its partner the Christian Social

Union (CSU) are also at odds with one another. Following the Second World War the conservative and clerical parties of the pre-war Weimar period were cobbled together, but never really represented homogeneous parties. They were characterized instead by regional and other interests groups. Former CDU leader Helmut Kohl had been able to hold the party together with his own financial scheme involving slush funds, but his successor Angela Merkel has been unable to follow his example.

Looking back, business circles have the fondest memories of the Social Democrat Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, which took over from Kohl in 1998 and governed until 2005. The Schröder-Fischer government implemented more "social reforms"—i.e., drastic social and welfare cuts—than any other German government before or since. This is why the SPD and the Greens are now being heavily promoted in the North-Rhine Westphalia election campaign.

According to opinion polls, both the SPD and the Greens have increased their level of support, while support for the CDU has fallen following revelations of dubious relations between the party and business interests. Although such relations prevail amongst all parties, these revelations have been blown up into a scandal with correspondingly negative consequences for the party in polls, which now record the SPD-Greens and the CDU-FDP with equal levels of support.

It was under these conditions that the "duel of the leading candidates" took place on television on Tuesday featuring "the challenger Hannelore Kraft (SPD) against the sitting Prime Minister Jochen Rüttgers (CDU)" (WDR television).

In the event, there was little to differentiate between the candidates. Rüttgers and Kraft expressed their agreement on all major political questions. Above all they were united in their determination not to address the truly important issues that affect millions: the dramatic increase in the number of unemployed and underemployed, the financial bankruptcy of many municipalities and the associated social decay of whole regions.

Both spoke of inevitable economic cuts and the necessity

for wiping out of tens of thousands of jobs in public service. Despite different views on the future organization of the educational system, both candidates declared their intention to make cuts in education. The attack on social conditions will clearly intensify, irrespective of whether the CDU or SPD heads the new state parliament.

What stood out in the “duel” was the way Hannelore Kraft concluded her television appearance. She shamelessly praised the SPD as the “party of social justice”, which strives for social cohesion. Kraft evidently assumes that voters are stupid and have forgotten who was responsible for the Hartz laws and the Agenda 2010. In fact, millions of German workers have been victims of the SPD and Green Party policies.

Before the economist Kraft began her career in the SPD and became a member of the IG Metall trade union, she was active for many years as a management consultant. In a certain sense she plays the same role today. She is offering entrepreneurs the services of what remains of the bureaucratic apparatus of the SPD following the loss of hundreds of thousands of members who have left the party in disgust in recent years because of its antisocial policies.

Hannelore Kraft was hauled into state politics and promoted by Wolfgang Clement (SPD), who later as federal minister for economy and labor drew up the Hartz laws. He then quit the SPD because he was of the opinion that Agenda 2010 had not gone far enough. Clement has just published a book together with CDU right-winger Friedrich Merz, in which they demand much deeper welfare cuts.

When the SPD was voted out of office in North-Rhine Westphalia five years ago, Hannelore Kraft was minister for science and research. In this function she implemented policies that have since been taken over by the CDU-FDP state government led by Jürgen Rüttgers. She introduced so-called study accounts, which were then later transformed into study fees. She also organized the closer cooperation of universities with major companies aimed at aligning the education system to the interests of big business. At the same time she oversaw substantial job cuts in the sphere of education.

As a result of these policies the SPD saw the biggest decline in its share of the vote in the state in the last 50 years. The response of the party to its devastating defeat five years ago was a further swing to the right. It prematurely dissolved the federal parliament and entered Merkel’s first government as junior partner in a grand coalition. In NRW the SPD cooperated closely with Rüttgers in an unofficial grand coalition. Then, last year the SPD suffered further heavy defeats in North Rhine-Westphalia in the European, federal and local elections.

The present North-Rhine Westphalia campaign for the

revival of the SPD is not based on any revival of support within the population. Quite the reverse. It has its origins in a deliberate campaign by business associations and the media in the hope that the SPD, based on its close relations with the trade union bureaucracy, is better placed to implement drastic austerity measures in the form of an Agenda 2020.

The situation in NRW recalls the change of government from Helmut Kohl to Schröder 12 years ago. At that time leading business representatives expressed their doubts that Kohl’s CDU-FDP coalition would be unable to go ahead with the business community’s demand for substantial social cuts. They demanded a change. At the same time, petty bourgeois groups, describing themselves as left and socialist, celebrated the SPD in coalition with the Greens as a progressive alternative following 17 years of governments led by Kohl. What then happened is well known.

It is in this connection that one has to understand the role played by the Left Party in the NRW election. As was the case at the end of the 1990s, the Left Party now praises the SPD and Greens as a left alternative to Rüttgers and seeks to lever the SPD to power. It works in this manner directly in the interests of those sections of the ruling class that regard the SPD and management consultant Kraft as the best choice for an effective policy of welfare cuts.

The working class must decisively reject this position and look reality in the eye. None of the parties on offer in North Rhine-Westphalia represents the interests of the working population. Irrespective of the precise composition of the next state government and the opposition, workers confront an all-party coalition intent on a program of social cuts that will far outweigh anything carried out in the past.

The preparation for the social conflicts that will begin immediately after the election calls for the construction of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), the German section of the Fourth international. The PSG connects active resistance against dismissals and welfare cuts in the form of strikes and factory occupations with an international, socialist perspective. We clearly assert that the power of the dominant financial aristocracy can only be broken by an independent mobilization of the working class aimed at expropriating the large corporations and the banks and placing production under the democratic control of the working population.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact