

# After the election in North Rhine-Westphalia: Preparations for a grand coalition

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One week after the state election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), there are increasing signs that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) are preparing “grand coalitions” of both parties at a state and federal level. Faced with the rapid intensification of the economic crisis, leading representatives of business and industry are calling for a “strong and capable” government. Politicians must “start ruling instead of reacting” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*).

The so-called euro-bailout package of €750 billion, which was authorized a week ago at an emergency meeting in Brussels, will be the prelude to vicious attacks on the living standards and working conditions of the masses. Brutal austerity measures, like those being imposed in Greece, are now to be implemented against the entire working population of the European Union.

Even before the election, a wide cross-section of the ruling elite were of the opinion that the CDU-Free Democratic Party (FDP) coalition under Chancellor Angela Merkel was not strong enough to force through the desired cuts in social welfare in the face of anticipated opposition. The FDP has already disqualified itself by revealing its role as a client-serving party that represents specific business interests, with a chairman, Guido Westerwelle, who makes provocative statements against the unemployed. Chancellor Merkel has been criticized for failing to keep the FDP in line.

The state election in NRW is thus being used as a lever to put pressure on the SPD to cooperate politically and work with the trade unions to ensure that planned social attacks can be more effectively implemented. Should the SPD resume power in the NRW parliament, it will assume responsibility both in the Federal Council where the CDU and FDP have lost their majority and in federal politics as a whole. That is why the media and sections of the ruling class are conducting a concerted campaign to promote the SPD and the Green Party, while at the same time

criticizing the FDP and current NRW Prime Minister Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU).

However, the election results have made the process of building a state administration much more complicated than was hoped. Despite a massive loss of 10 percent at the polls, the CDU remain the strongest party, with a narrow lead of 6,200 votes. The SPD also lost votes again, returning its worst result since 1958.

A coalition between the SPD and the Green Party to replace the former CDU-FDP coalition is only possible with the support of the Left party. The latter immediately responded by declaring their willingness to carry out “serious talks” with the SPD and the Green Party.

Their main candidate, Bärbel Bauermann, announced that the party was waiting to be invited to such negotiations. Dietmar Bartsch, their former federal manager (he recently resigned from this position), had already publicly stated on the eve of the election that his party was “of course fully capable of assuming government”.

The Left party is prepared to swallow all political differences to help the SPD into power. They have already immediately and dutifully dropped their programmatic demands for re-nationalisations and the reversal of public spending cuts. The chairman of the NRW Left party, Wolfgang Zimmermann, told *Spiegel Online* that nationalisation of the energy companies E.ON and RWE was no longer to be a basic precondition for a coalition with the SPD.

Despite this political debasement on the part of the Left party, there remains great resistance amongst NRW SPD members to any cooperation with the party. The NRW SPD is, after all, still heavily influenced by the right-wing factional politics of former SPD chairman Franz Müntefering and by the two federal state ministers Wolfgang Clement und Peer Steinbrück.

There has also been some speculation about the

possibility of a so-called “traffic light” coalition, i.e., one made up of the SPD (red), the FDP (yellow) and the Green Party. The vice SPD chairman and former employment minister, Olaf Scholz, published a proposal in the *Hamburger Abendblatt* for the FDP to consider such a possible coalition. And the FDP federal state chairman, Andreas Pinkwart, signalled his own readiness to have talks about such a “traffic light” coalition. But then the FDP leader Westerwelle moved to prevent such a step and last Thursday the NRW FDP decisively rejected any such talks with the SPD and the Green Party.

This is the background that is increasingly driving the CDU to seek a coalition with the SPD. The acting CDU chairman of NRW, Oliver Wittke, stressed that the CDU is still the strongest party in the state, despite having lost so many votes, and is therefore entitled to determine who should be prime minister. But then the issue gets complicated. Because as the strongest party, the CDU refuses to accept a coalition with the SPD with the SPD leading candidate, Hannelore Kraft, as prime minister. On the other hand, the SPD are refusing to accept a renewed term for Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU), because he was clearly voted out of this post. This means that in order for negotiations to continue Rüttgers must first step down.

Wittke has said that the question as to who should replace Rüttgers would be decided right at the end of negotiations. Figures under consideration by the CDU are current Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen, NRW General Secretary Andreas Krautscheid and NRW Minister for Integration and the Family Armin Laschet.

In the meantime Rüttgers is still functioning in his position as NRW prime minister and state party leader. He wants to conduct the coalition negotiations himself, and has offered talks with the SPD, the FDP and the Green Party. He is being treated by Merkel as a potential cabinet interior minister. He is being lined up to replace the current interior secretary, Thomas de Maizière (CDU), should the latter take over the position of finance minister from the current incumbent, Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), who is stepping down due to ill health.

But at the same time, the Hesse minister president, Roland Koch, is putting himself forward. He had already positioned himself, days after the NRW election, to implement more public spending cuts. In an interview with *Hamburger Abendblatt*, he complained about the government’s “lack of decisiveness” and “failure to act quickly enough” with regard to cutting public spending over the last few months. He said that even the cutting of the Merkel government’s promised nursery provision and

other educational spending should no longer be taboo subjects in the face of the necessary austerity measures.

Koch has merely been publicly voicing the opinions of many CDU members. “It is remarkable how limited the outrage has been against Koch’s cost-saving proposals amongst CDU members”, wrote *Spiegel Online*.

Koch also knows very well how to handle the SPD: He has already worked closely together with Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) in various federal state working parties. Steinbrück has even praised Koch for being a “competent and reliable” politician.

In a recent editorial, the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* summed up “*Merkels Grundproblem*” (Merkel’s main problem) as follows: “She has had the wrong partner for most of her political life.” Whereas Merkel had the support of “reliable partners” during her coalition between 2005 and 2009, “like Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Peer Steinbrück [both SPD]”, she is now stuck with obviously overstretched partners such as Guido Westerwelle or Rainer Brüderle [FDP].”

The squabbles about forming a new governing coalition in North Rhine-Westphalia are not simply about parliamentary vote calculations or fighting for seats. All the parties are agreed they have to implement massive public spending cuts. By bringing the SPD into government, they hope to use the party to more effectively suppress and diffuse resistance from below.



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