

# The role of the Left Party in North Rhine-Westphalia

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On May 9 the electorate in Germany's largest state, North Rhine-Westphalia, voted against the conservative-led (CDU-FDP) state government. Since then there has been a scramble by political parties to form a viable coalition in the state. The composition of a state government in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has traditionally been significant as a pointer to trends in federal politics.

Now, six weeks after the poor result for the Christian Democratic Union, in a vote that was regarded as a signal of growing opposition to the federal CDU-CSU-Free Democratic Party coalition government, the Social Democratic Party and the Greens have announced their intentions of forming a minority administration in NRW. The establishment of an SPD-Green government in the state now means that the CDU-FDP will lose their existing majority in the country's second parliamentary chamber, the Bundestag.

During the election campaign, the SPD and Greens received considerable support from the media, while the CDU and FDP were subjected to harsh criticism. Sections of the German ruling elite have concluded that coalitions of the CDU-FDP, whether at a federal or a state level, such as that which has governed NRW for the past four years, are far too weak to implement planned social attacks. These forces regard the North Rhine-Westphalia election as an opportunity to draw the SPD and Greens increasingly into government responsibility.

In the event, the election result made it difficult to implement such a strategy. Despite a substantial loss of support for the CDU and FDP, the CDU still emerged as the strongest party with a mere 6,000-vote lead over the SPD. As a result, the party declared its right to lead the state government.

While the CDU-FDP coalition had been voted out of office, the SPD and Greens had insufficient support to form a government with a majority. Initial discussions followed between the SPD and Greens and the Left party and then with the FDP. Talks with the Left party collapsed after just one day, and then a deal with the FDP was ruled out after the party leadership in Berlin issued a veto of such a coalition (i.e., SPD-Greens-FDP).

Days of discussion about the creation of a "grand coalition" (i.e., CDU and SPD) also collapsed with no conclusion. Despite broad areas of agreement the SPD broke off discussion, declaring it did not want to be a junior partner in a government led by the former Prime Minister Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU). The rejection of a coalition with Rüttgers was seen in Berlin as a rejection of any cooperation with the CDU to support Chancellor Angela Merkel. A further attempt at talks with the FDP exposed internal conflicts inside the FDP, with the leader of the state's organization favouring a deal with the social democrats against the wishes of the national leadership.

The SPD state leadership then declared that under the given circumstances it saw no possibility of establishing an SPD-led administration, declaring that an SPD-Green minority government would prove to be too politically unstable. At a press conference the SPD state leader, Hannelore Kraft, announced that the SPD would provide a "powerful opposition" to the CDU and FDP government.

There then followed a storm of criticism in the media and from the SPD headquarters. Several newspapers, in particular the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, accused the NRW SPD of "bad political behaviour" and pushed for the formation of an SPD-Green minority government. The SPD chairman, Sigmar Gabriel, also made it clear that he preferred a minority government in order to exercise more influence over federal politics via the Bundestag.

Then, last week, when FDP state leaders declared that the FDP was not prepared to withdraw its ministers from the state government, the SPD did a complete turnaround. Hannelore Kraft now declared that she planned to establish an SPD-Green minority government and would stand as candidate for prime minister in the middle of July.

The acting Prime Minister Rüttgers then announced he would not stand against Kraft, and that the CDU would propose no other candidates, thereby leaving the way free for SPD candidate Kraft.

With her change of stance, Kraft was responding to increasing pressure by business lobbies and sections of the ruling elite, who anticipate social conflicts following the implementation of austerity measures. They seek to draw the SPD, Greens and the trade unions more closely into government responsibility in order to suppress any social resistance. In view of the current crisis of the CDU-FDP federal government, these forces look fondly back to the days of the SPD-Green federal coalition led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, which in their opinion was the most successful government in recent years.

Minority governments have tended to be the exception up to now in Germany. They are considered to be politically unstable and ineffective. However a number of commentators have indicated that this should not be a problem in NRW. The SPD-Green deputies lack an overall majority, but they can rely on the support or abstention of the 11 deputies of the Left Party who can also be counted on to back Kraft in the vote over a new prime minister. With the support of the Left Party a Kraft administration would then have a 10-vote majority.

One thing is clear from the political squabbling in NRW: there are no fundamental differences between the various parties. They all agree on the issue of drastic social cuts in order to finance massive bailout packages for the banks. During the course of the past few weeks every conceivable coalition was explored. Such plans failed not because of basic political differences, but rather due to issues of tactical party

orientation. It became clear that no one had compunctions about who they took to bed.

In this respect the Left Party is no exception. On the contrary, the party is playing a key role in the preparation of an SPD-Green minority government. At every opportunity Hannelore Kraft declared that cooperation with the Left Party is not feasible at present. In fact it is now clear that the decision for an SPD-Green minority administration is bound up with a re-evaluation of the Left Party. In view of the prospect of imminent social conflicts, the SPD leadership and sections of the ruling elite have concluded that the Left Party should also take up more responsibility in government.

Kraft made this point very clear in an interview in *Der Spiegel* magazine. While she does not have to rely directly on support from the Left, she knows that she can rely upon the party to vote against the CDU on important legislative initiatives. Kraft told *Der Spiegel*, “For nearly all laws a simple majority is enough. This only fails to apply when the Left Party votes solidly with the CDU and FDP”. However this is very unlikely.

For its part, the Left Party is jubilant over the change of heart by the SPD. Their representatives in both Berlin and NRW are going to extreme lengths to agitate in favour of an SPD-Green alliance and see no problem with the fact that their political fortunes are being advanced by a figure, Hannelore Kraft, who prior to her political career was a business consultant, belongs to the right wing of the SPD and was also a member of the former SPD administration in NRW that was hammered by the electorate in the state elections held four years ago.

Under conditions where memories are still fresh of the antisocial policies introduced by the former Schröder-Fischer government, and social democrats and the Greens are regularly met with booing and jeering on protest demonstrations against Merkel’s austerity measures, the Left Party is now trying to drum up new illusions in both parties.

One of the main demagogues of the Left Party is Ulrich Maurer. The attorney from the state of Baden-Württemberg was a functionary in the SPD for over three decades, a speaker on domestic affairs for the party’s executive and regarded as a potential candidate for the post of federal interior minister. Two years after quitting the SPD he took over responsibility for expanding the Left Party in West Germany at the behest of its executive committee.

Maurer has declared his support and readiness to collaborate with the SPD and the Greens in a number of interviews. “We have always said that we are ready for a coalition with the SPD and the Greens”, he told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. When asked what the Left Party meant when it called for a “change in policies”, Maurer answered that he expected the immediate abolition of student study fees. He added that he anticipated that “Mrs. Kraft will soon look to us for discussions”.

The declaration by the Left Party that an SPD-Green government represents a “lesser evil” compared to the CDU and FDP is simply false. In its period in office the SPD-Green government (1998 to 2005) implemented more drastic social cuts than all of its conservative predecessors, and since then both parties have moved even further to the right.

With its propaganda for an SPD-Green government, the Left Party is echoing the sentiments of prominent business associations, which are even prepared to entertain a change of government, but currently prefer to play their cards close to the chest. It is no accident that one of the leading critics of the German government is the country’s leading

business newspaper based in NRW, *Handelsblatt*.

The following consideration also plays a role: under the leadership of Guido Westerwelle, the FDP adopted neo-liberal positions largely directed at reducing the role of the state in the economy coupled with the privatization of state-based benefits. However, the financial and economic crisis has necessitated the massive intervention of the state in the form of rescue packages amounting to hundreds of billions. More importantly, a strong state is essential in ensuring that the burden of such economic measures is shifted onto the broad layers of the population.

The call for a return of the SPD to government, or at least the intensified integration of the SPD into government responsibility at a state and federal level, is bound up with stabilizing the state apparatus necessary to suppress social conflicts. In this respect, the close relationship of the SPD, as well as the Greens, with the trade unions plays an important role. The reformist trade unions always saw their task in dampening and suppressing the class struggle. In crisis periods as opposed to times of social peace they emerge much more consciously and directly as a guarantor of bourgeois order.

The Left Party supports the call for a strong state and tries to create as much confusion as possible over the role of the state. The party regards the welfare state as a mechanism for stabilising bourgeois rule and rejects any defence of social rights and gains on the basis of an independent mobilization of the working class on a socialist perspective.

The largest section of the membership of the Left Party originates from the Party of Democratic Socialism, which following the reunification of Germany not only took over the party machinery, but also a majority of the cadres and structures of the Stalinist SED. In the eastern states it has proved to be a vital political instrument for implementing cuts and economic measures while suppressing popular resistance. The union of the PDS with a wing of the trade union bureaucracy from the west to form the Left Party took place at a time when the trade unions adapted ever more closely to the state apparatus.



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