

What is driving the crisis of the German government?

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The crisis of Germany's coalition government has been continuing for weeks. There is hardly an issue on which the three coalition parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—are agreed. Whether it is on austerity measures, tax policy, health care or military service, the governing parties, or various wings of these parties, are at loggerheads.

The poll ratings of the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) have collapsed. If a general election were held this Sunday, the FDP would win just five percent of the vote—a sharp decline since the election nine months ago, when the FDP obtained almost 15 percent.

The CDU/CSU polls at just over 30 percent, while the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) remains below this figure. On the other hand, the Greens have reached a record level of 18 percent—a clear indication of political turbulence within the middle classes.

The SPD and Greens are presently recording higher poll numbers than the government coalition, but they could achieve a governing majority only with the support of the Left Party, whose poll numbers are unchanged at 11 percent.

For the past week leading newspapers have been predicting the end of the government headed by Merkel and Guido Westerwelle of the FDP. Some are demanding it.

The internal crisis of the government could come to a head when it holds talks next weekend on health care reform. The FDP is vehemently calling for a capitation scheme, while the CSU is just as vehemently rejecting it.

Alternately, the government could collapse if Christian Wulff, the CDU and FDP joint candidate for German president, is defeated in the June 30 election in parliament. Within the FDP there is considerable support for Joachim Gauck, nominated by the SPD and the Greens as a rival candidate.

Many commentators locate the crisis of the government in the weaknesses of its leading figures—the lack of decisiveness on the part of Merkel, the immature behavior of Westerwelle, the unpredictability of CSU leader Horst

Seehofer. But the causes lie deeper. The government is confronted with fundamental social changes for which it has no answer.

Decades of welfare cuts and the consequences of the international economic crisis have undermined the policy of social equilibrium, which provided Germany a certain stability in the postwar decades. In particular, the middle classes, the traditional bulwark of parliamentary democracy, are being broken up and weakened.

It is no accident that a study by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) on the erosion of the middle classes has attracted much attention. The researchers come to the conclusion that the growth in the number of poor people, and, to a far lesser extent, the rich, has come at the expense of the middle-income strata. They warn that a strong middle class is “essential for the maintenance of social stability”.

Westerwelle's FDP, which combines undisguised lobbying for the financial elite with appeals to the selfishness of the better-off, had convinced itself that it could channel the middle class' fears of social decline and direct it against the poorest in society. But his attacks on welfare recipients, whom he has denounced as examples of “late Roman decadence”, have completely missed their mark.

An empirical study by political scientists in Göttingen concludes, “The [social] centre currently does not have the impression that the abusive behaviour that threatens the financial framework of Germany is coming from the bottom of the social system”. On the other hand, when it comes to “CEOs, bankers and financial speculators...the majority of the centre now talk more radically than the SPD”.

This explains the rapid decline of the FDP.

The CDU/CSU is caught between the parties' divergent social bases and regional wings. Big business representatives, small business owners, farmers, civil servants and workers cannot be united under the umbrella of a single party when society is being pulled apart. Catholicism, itself in a deep crisis, long ago lost its viability

as a unifying party bond.

In foreign affairs as well, the federal government faces new challenges. The Western alliance, a guiding principle of German foreign policy since Adenauer, is breaking apart. In the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and increasing transatlantic tensions, the longstanding close alliance with the US is emerging as a hostage to fortune. Within Europe, conflicts are mounting and threaten to shatter the European Union.

Under these circumstances, more and more voices are calling for a return of the SPD to power. Ever since the November 1918 revolution, when the SPD rescued capitalist property relations from the onslaught of the workers and soldiers, this party has repeatedly been called upon to defend the existing order and impose the necessary changes in times of crisis.

In 1969, SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt removed the rebellious youth from the streets and helped the German export industry find new markets with his highly controversial *Ostpolitik*. And in 1998, when big business complained about the “stagnation” under Helmut Kohl (CDU), Gerhard Schröder (SPD) gutted the social security system with his Agenda 2010 welfare “reforms”.

Unlike the FDP, which wants to roll back the influence of the state, the SPD considers a strong state to be indispensable in times of crisis—not a strong welfare state, which has been largely destroyed in seven years of the SPD-Green Party coalition and four years of a grand coalition—but a state that rises above the social classes and acts with a firm hand, forcing welfare recipients to do community work and disciplining workers through the unions.

For their part, the unions are more than willing to assume such a role. The SPD’s first priority is to maintain “social peace”, i.e., to suppress the class struggle, even if it means the renunciation of all the social gains of the last six decades.

The SPD can also rely upon the support of the Greens. The former party of environmentalism and peace has long since become the champion of strict fiscal discipline and military operations abroad.

As for the Left Party, the heir to the ruling party in Stalinist East Germany, it has always understood “socialism” to mean a strong, authoritarian state that stifles any independent movement of the workers. The former SPD chair, now the outgoing Left Party chair, Oskar Lafontaine played a national leadership role thirty years ago when he was mayor of Saarbrücken, forcing welfare recipients to do community work. Later, as Saarland state premier, he oversaw the liquidation of the region’s steel and mining industries, working in close collaboration with the trade unions.

The Left Party is determined to help the SPD back to power, whether as a coalition partner or by supporting an SPD-Green minority government, as is currently being prepared in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Whether the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition actually comes to a premature end is an open question. The Constitution provides for a change of government in the middle of a parliamentary term only in exceptional circumstances, and there is little relish for new elections in the CDU/CSU and FDP.

The question of what sort of coalition might replace the current government is also open. A grand coalition of the CDU and the SPD, which would command a majority even without new elections, a coalition of SPD, FDP and Greens, or an SPD-Green coalition, with the participation or support of the Left Party? The last two variants could obtain a majority only through a new election.

One thing is certain: a return of the SPD to government would not represent a left-wing development. It would launch a new round of welfare cuts and attacks on democratic rights. At the same time, it would increase the risk that the political ferment in the middle class finds right-wing expression—as has taken place recently in the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium and Hungary.

The future development depends on the independent action of the working class. It cannot allow itself to be shackled by illusions in the SPD, the unions or the Left Party.

It must establish its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie and all of its parties, “left” as well as right. Jobs, incomes and democratic and social rights can be defended only on the basis of a socialist programme, which takes the banks and big corporations into social ownership and places them under democratic control.

This requires the building of a new party, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), German section of the Fourth International.

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