

SPD, Greens, Left Party groomed for new role in German politics

Ulrich Rippert
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The formation of a Social Democratic Party-Green Party minority government in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has major political implications for German politics at the federal level.

For months, media criticism has been growing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-led coalition government in Berlin, which includes the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

Business newspapers, especially the *Handelsblatt*, which is published in the NRW state capital Düsseldorf, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel* have been firing off political shots against Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Sections of the ruling elite believe the Merkel government is too weak to implement the austerity measures that the banks and big business demand. They have been put off by recurrent internal conflicts among the coalition partners and blame Merkel for exercising weak leadership.

The federal government is unable to carry through “reforms vital to the economy” (*Handelsblatt*) and, according to media critics, seeks to hide its weakness by provocatively proclaiming its intention to impose harsh social measures, unnecessarily sparking protests.

The same media outlets that criticize Merkel speak favorably of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD), and even more so of the Greens.

The recent formation of an SPD-Green minority government in the most populous German state, North Rhine-Westphalia, represents a step in the direction of a change of government at the federal level involving one or both of the opposition parties.

As a result of the power shift in NRW, the Merkel government has lost its majority in the Bundesrat (upper house of parliament), and can now enact laws

only in cooperation with the opposition parties. The election of Hannelore Kraft (SPD) as NRW state premier, to take place next week, is being greeted by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* as the “dawn of an SPD-Green future.”

Both the SPD and the Greens have previously formed governments in NRW and at the federal level. What is new in this “Red-Green” coalition in NRW is the inclusion of the Left Party as a critical factor in the government of a large West German state.

The SPD-Green coalition in Düsseldorf lacks, by one vote, the number it needs to adopt a state budget this autumn. It is unlikely to receive the needed vote from the CDU or FDP. The coalition must count on the Left Party to supply that vote and thereby keep the SPD and Greens in power in NRW. For its part, the Left Party is rushing to proclaim its loyal support.

In an interview with the *Stadt-Anzeiger* of Cologne, Left Party leader Gesine Löttsch said Wednesday: “We have said from the outset that we will replace Rüttgers [the outgoing CDU state premier] and want a change of policy. We will not prevent Frau Kraft taking office.”

Löttsch went on to insist that the Left Party is “entirely reliable” on this matter, adding that it has “80 percent agreement” on the main questions and is willing to negotiate on the rest.

There is a stark contrast between the formation of the new government in NRW and the situation 18 months ago in Hesse. After the Hesse state election in late 2008, the SPD regional chair attempted to form a government with the support of the Left Party. But she was thwarted by the media, the national SPD, and SPD right-wingers in her own parliamentary grouping.

Things are different now. Initially, Hannelore Kraft, who previously worked as a business consultant and is close to the right wing of the SPD, made no secret of

her opposition to any collaboration with the Left Party. Only under pressure from SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel and much of the media did she change her position.

How is this change of heart in the SPD and broad sections of the media to be explained?

At the end of 2008, the economic crisis had only just erupted and appeared to be manageable. The federal government at the time was a grand coalition of the CDU and SPD, and the ruling class was looking either to its continuation or its replacement by a CDU-CSU-FDP coalition. The Left Party was seen as an uncertain factor, whose involvement in government was regarded as detrimental and unnecessary.

Some 15 months later, the full impact of the economic crisis is making itself felt. The ruling class is determined above all to make the working class pay for the crisis through massive cuts, which will eradicate the postwar welfare state. The present coalition has failed to fulfill the expectations of the bourgeoisie, is internally divided, pursues petty politics and faces growing resistance from the population.

Under these conditions, the Left Party is being given the task of lending an SPD-Green government a pseudo-left tinge. This coalition, for its part, has no doubt as to its tasks.

The NRW “Red-Green” government, backed by the Left Party, is under orders to show greater internal unity and utilize its close ties to the trade unions to take action more effectively and ruthlessly against the working class than the current federal coalition has shown itself capable of doing. The movers and shakers in the German ruling elite are well aware that in Greece, Spain and Portugal drastic austerity measures are being imposed by Social Democratic governments supported by the trade unions.

The new NRW government is to take its lead from the SPD-Green federal coalition led by Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005) and the SPD-Green-Left Party coalition in the Berlin Senate under Klaus Wowereit. In both cases, brutal attacks on social programs and working class living standards were carried out by the “left” parties of the bourgeoisie.

At the end of last year, the state debt of NRW was €122.1 billion, and it is expected to rise this year to €129.1 billion. Interest payments to the banks currently run at around €4.6 billion and are rising steadily. Drastic cuts in social spending are being planned.

In order not to jeopardize their coming to power in NRW, the SPD and Greens have postponed the worst cuts until budget negotiations are held this autumn. The abolition of tuition fees and expansion of day-care centres stipulated in the coalition agreement are primarily meant to win the support of the trade unions and social organizations, which will be needed when the austerity measures are announced in the autumn. Immediately after the announcement of the coalition agreement, the IG Metall District Director Oliver Burkhardt declared that his union would offer the new government its full support and cooperation.

In this test run for a political realignment at the federal level, the Left Party has to prove its reliability and readiness to serve as an important pillar of bourgeois rule.

An SPD-Green national government, either backed by or including the Left Party, would be quite capable of introducing authoritarian forms of rule. Such a government would not hesitate to use brutal measures to counter social opposition that it or the trade unions were unable to control

A glimpse at the past shows that so-called “left” governments—such as the Popular Front governments of the 1930s in Spain and France, suppressed social opposition and opened the road to right-wing and fascist regimes. The danger of such a development is demonstrated by recent events in Hungary and the Netherlands. In both countries, the Social Democratic parties oversaw a devastating social decline and strengthened the influence of extreme right-wing parties.

The claim that an SPD-Green-Left Party government would be a “lesser evil” compared to the current federal coalition is false. The working class must reject the opportunist policies of the Left Party and intervene as an independent political force. This requires the building of a new party, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), which opposes capitalism and tackles problems at their roots.

Ulrich Rippert



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