

Conservatives contend for power in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia

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The chairmen and prime ministers of German states traditionally have considerable power within Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The federal structure of Germany and the extensive powers reserved to individual states permit them to exercise a certain independence vis-à-vis the federal party and federal government. As a result, the replacement by the CDU, which is currently rent by internal conflicts, of party heads in six states whose previous leaders recently lost power or resigned provides an indication of the future course of the party.

In terms of political content, there is little to choose between the different wings and currents in the party. In the course of the economic crisis, all of Germany's leading political parties have moved closer together.

Without exception, they have bowed to the will of the bankers and supported the pouring of billions into their coffers, while at the same time severely cutting public expenditure. This is particularly true of the CDU, which has been closely bound up with the interests of big business and the banks since the days of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.

The conflicts between the rival party wings revolve around the question of the sort of social layers that can be mobilized to support the CDU's policies. The hard-line conservatives defend the traditional values of the CDU—the family, Christianity, nationalism—and link them to hatred of foreigners, law-and-order issues and other hobby horses of the extreme right. They appeal to the increasingly elderly traditional constituency of the CDU in the countryside as well as layers of the middle class who are open to rightist slogans.

The “modern” conservatives, on the other hand, look for support for their pro-business policy amongst better-off layers of the urban middle classes. They link the necessity of austerity measures with ecology and aim at closer cooperation with the Greens, who have their roots in the same social layer.

On this basis, the new mayor of Hamburg, Christoph Ahlhaus, who is regarded as a right-winger inside the CDU, has agreed to continue the city-state's coalition with the

Greens first inaugurated by his CDU compatriot and predecessor Ole von Beust.

In the state of Baden-Württemberg, the extreme-right Stefan Mappus succeeded the outgoing CDU prime minister Günther Oettinger, who went on to take up a job with the European Union.

In the state of Hesse, a traditional center of the party right wing, Prime Minister Roland Koch resigned and handed over power to his co-thinker Volker Bouffier. Koch was supported in his decision to step down by former CDU leader and chancellor of many years Helmut Kohl, who, despite severe health problems, plans to attend Koch's resignation ceremony.

In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the state with the biggest CDU regional organization, two representatives of the “modern wing,” Federal Environment Secretary Norbert Röttgen and the former NRW integration minister, Armin Laschet, are competing to replace Jürgen Rüttgers, who resigned as head of the state CDU following his defeat in recent state elections. The election campaign between the two makes clear how sections of the CDU are planning to establish, together with the Greens, a government which is extremely hostile to the working population.

Both Röttgen and Laschet have for some time explored the possibility of forming a new power constellation with the Greens. In the mid-1990s, both men were members of the so-called “Pizza Connection” (named after an Italian restaurant in Bonn where CDU and Green Party deputies met for informal talks).

Those involved in the “Connection” at the time included, on behalf of the CDU, the current head of the German chancellery, Ronald Pofalla, the general secretary of the CDU, Hermann Gröhe, and the general secretary of the CDU in NRW, Andreas Krautscheid. Also taking part were leading Greens such as the former federal health minister, Andrea Fischer, the current Green chairman, Cem Özdemir, and Matthias Berninger, Volker Beck and Oswald Metzger. Some time ago Metzger left the Greens and joined the CDU.

In more recent years, politicians from the two parties have

held meetings in Berlin, at the restaurant “Le Cochon Bourgeois” (“the Bourgeois Pig”) in Kreuzberg. The initiative is said to have come from Hermann Gröhe and Margareta Wolf of the Greens.

Laschet headed a new ministry for generations, family, women and integration in the state government of outgoing Jürgen Rüttgers. At the beginning of August, Laschet made an open appeal to the Greens in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung*. The current NRW administration, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, “united the negative aspects of both parties,” he wrote. As “a Christian democrat” he sought to integrate with the Greens. “Things would be different with a CDU-Green government,” Laschet declared.

Environment Secretary Röttgen is one of the so-called “Merkel guard” who advanced inside the CDU under the auspices of the current chancellor, Angela Merkel. He has close links to big business and was a candidate to head the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI) in 2007. His bid failed because he was unwilling to lay down his mandate in the federal parliament (Bundestag).

Following the 2009 federal election, Merkel appointed Röttgen environment secretary, and from this position he worked for closer cooperation with the Greens. Following a decision by the Merkel government to extend the life of nuclear power plants, Röttgen defied the government and declared he was prepared to contemplate an extension of only eight years.

This immediately turned him into a target for the nuclear power lobby and for those conservative-led states in southern Germany which are heavily reliant on nuclear power. In Baden-Württemberg, Prime Minister Mappus (CDU) went so far as to call for Röttgen's resignation.

Since then, Röttgen has tirelessly sought to publicise his vision of a fusion of “economic modernisation and Christian values.” Above all, he stresses the advantages of ecology to business leaders, who are currently earning billions from the export of pollution-control technology.

“Ecology and environmental and climate protection rank among the new basic conditions of the economy, with which one can conquer new products and markets,” he declared on German radio. “That is my modern understanding of climate and economic policy.” Similar statements could have come from any leading representative of the Greens.

In the sphere of social policy, Röttgen represents extreme right-wing positions. He defends the Hartz anti-welfare laws, plans for raising the retirement age to 67, and the “debt brake,” which will mandate further drastic social cuts in coming years.

In his book *Germany's Best Years are Still to Come* (2009), Röttgen speaks in favour of “participatory justice”

and opposes “distributive justice.” By “participatory justice” he means: “Activity instead of passivity, autonomy instead of heteronomy, chances instead of generosity, and responsibility instead of disenfranchisement.” This is a classic formula for the liquidation of the welfare state.

His opponent Laschet was active as a young man in the Catholic aid organisation Third World and seeks to curry favor with those Greens who are repulsed by the overt nationalism and xenophobia espoused by a figure like Koch. In March 2008, Laschet told *Der Spiegel*: “A part of the Greens came from the Catholic youth, many from homes that voted CDU. Some turned to a relatively new alternative party (i.e., the Greens) in order to register their protest.” He added that friendships with members of the Greens remain from the time of the Pizza Connection, “in my case with Cem Özdemir.”

Like Röttgen, Laschet supports a policy of welfare cuts, declaring, “Serious savings and consolidation of budgets are ethically necessary and are a core of Christian-democratic policy.”

Laschet and Röttgen combine the lifestyle politics of the urban middle classes with the demand for social cuts. They differ only in nuance. “Sure, we have many things in common,” Röttgen said in an interview with a Cologne newspaper, “however, we have different emphases: Armin Laschet on social and integration policy, myself on economic and finance policy as well as environmental and energy policy.”

Although he comes from North-Rhine Westphalia, Röttgen is regarded as a representative of the federal party. He poses as the guarantor of a “new start” because he stands outside the NRW apparatus.

Knowing full well that local CDU leaders back Laschet, Röttgen is demanding a referendum of CDU members to decide who takes over as head of the state party. The regional party council has set August 30 for a vote on who should be chairman. The official election will then take place at a party congress at the beginning of November.

If Röttgen wins the election, he will be regarded as a possible candidate to succeed Merkel as chancellor. With 160,000 members, the NRW state organisation has a third of all delegates at the CDU's federal congress. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* comments: “That is naturally a significant power base, including when it comes to the question of who should follow Angela Merkel as federal chancellor.”



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