The end of the conservative-Green alliance in Hamburg

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Last Sunday, the Green Party in Hamburg declared it is withdrawing from the first ever conservative-Green coalition state administration in Germany. The Greens held a press conference at noon on Sunday to declare the end of the coalition.

Leading members of the Greens refrained from naming any concrete reasons for the collapse of their coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Instead, the state head of the Greens, Katharina Fegebank, spoke vaguely of the "dissipation of the common spirit and large degree of reliability which had marked the coalition up to the summer".

The Green deputy mayor mentioned "mismanagement", while the head of the Green parliamentary group, Jens Kerstan, declared that "The cause for the decision is the fifth resignation of a senate member within a few months".

In fact, the real reasons for the decision by the Greens to leave their alliance with the CDU lie predominantly in the sphere of federal politics. They are bound up with struggles inside the CDU and preparations for the seven state elections due to take place in 2011.

The coalition in the city-state of Hamburg was founded in the spring of 2008 and was looked upon by Green leaders as a role model for the party's future development. Former Green leader Joschka Fischer had declared triumphantly, "Naturally the Hamburg coalition—despite any arguments to the contrary—will be the crucial role model for the federation".

The former Green foreign minister, who still has influence in the party despite his withdrawal from active politics, stressed at the time: "A successful black-green (CDU-Green) coalition in Hamburg will change in principle the political landscape of the Federal Republic." Many inside the CDU were of a similar opinion.

But then political conditions changed rapidly. The collapse of the US Lehman Brothers bank in September 2008 unleashed the biggest international financial crisis since the 1920s, which has since then only intensified. In the winter of 2008, the grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and conservative parties (CDU/Christian Social Union) rapidly passed a €500 billion rescue package for German banks, with both Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) declaring there was no alternative to such a bailout.

In the federal elections held in September 2009, all of the governing parties suffered a substantial loss of votes and the grand coalition was finished. The new government alliance, consisting of conservative parties and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), soon came under fire from business lobbies and influential sections of the media for being too weak in carrying out the social cuts demanded by the banks. In particular, the arrogant manner in which the FDP repaid its business masters led to widespread anger in the population.

Under these conditions, conflicts within the conservative parties (known as the Union) increased. The course undertaken by CDU leader Merkel, aimed at "modernising" the party with an increasing orientation to urban middle class layers, encountered resistance from the clerical and conservative wing inside the party. Leading CDU figures such as Friedrich Merz, Roland Koch and Günther Öttinger, along with other right-wingers, refused to support Merkel's course.

In order to hold the party together, Merkel tried to make everybody happy. She introduced positions of the right wing into the CDU programme, withdrew from the deal previously struck by the Greens for an exit from nuclear energy, and also spoke out sharply against the prospect of a coalition with the Greens. At the same time, she filled important government posts with figures who favoured collaboration with the Greens, such as Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen and Labour Minister Ursula von der Leyen. However, such a balancing act cannot be maintained for any length of time.

With divisions apparent in the CDU, prominent representatives of the ruling elite are looking increasingly towards the prospect of an SPD-Green government as an

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alternative. Big business and the banks regarded approvingly the policies implemented by the former SPD-Green Party government led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer from 1998 to 2005, which slashed social expenditure and introduced a low-wage sector.

The recent decision by the Hamburg Greens to quit their coalition with the CDU is bound up with these considerations. New elections are due to take place in February, and the Hamburg election will serve as a prelude to the six state elections due in the coming year. Polls currently indicate a clear lead for an SPD-Green alliance. According to one recent poll (ZDF Election Study), electoral support for an SPD-Green administration lies at 62 percent (SPD 41, the Greens 21), with the CDU trailing far behind with 22 percent.

A new election in Hamburg provides an opportunity for the SPD. Spiegel online wrote: “Up to last weekend SPD strategists were fearful of the prospects for the party in 2011”. They were anxious about the state election in Saxony-Anhalt in March and the possibility of a debacle in the subsequent election in Baden-Württemberg, where, according to polls, the SPD is trailing significantly behind the Greens. “Now the year with seven state elections could begin with a victory”, the magazine concluded.

A defeat for the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, which has governed in the state for more than 50 years, would probably mean the end for Chancellor Merkel. The Hamburg election, therefore, points to a possible change of government at a federal level.

What one can expect from a future SPD-Green government at a state and federal level has already been shown by the Hamburg Greens. The party has reneged on virtually all of its election campaign promises in order to maintain an alliance with the CDU. From the start of negotiations with the CDU over a coalition, the Greens dropped their pre-election promises of a halt to a coal-fired power station and the prevention of any deepening of the river Elbe. Programmatically, the party differed in no way from the CDU and committed itself upon taking government to a “consolidation of the budget” amounting to €500 million annually. This is a position the party maintains even after breaking its coalition with the CDU.

Claims by the Greens that their withdrawal from the coalition are linked to allegations of corruption and the resignations of CDU senators are merely a pretext. The recent resignation of Finance Senator Carsten Frigge was by no means as unexpected as Green members claim. Accusations against Frigge had already been levelled prior to his election to the post of finance senator at the end of March—with the votes of the Greens.

Frigge resigned at the end of November after only eight months in office following claims of corruption and illegal donations to the CDU connected to his consulting firm C4 Consulting. It emerged that Frigge sat on the board of one company with links to state banks and pocketed €5,600 per day for his consultancy expertise.

According to the Hamburg mayor, Christoph Ahlhaus (CDU), the Greens had reacted positively just last week to the appointment of CDU deputy Rüdiger Kruse as Frigge’s successor. Kruse is the managing director of the “Association for the Protection of German Forests” and had voted against his party’s line in the Bundestag over the issue of extending the use of nuclear power plants.

The reason given last Sunday by Justice Senator Till Steffen—the refusal of the CDU to part company with the chairman of local HSH Nordbank—is also unserious. The states of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein have pumped 13 and 18 percent of their entire budgets, respectively, into propping up the ailing bank—again with the votes of the Greens.

The Greens had no objections when it came to paying out huge amounts of taxpayers’ money to the banks and together with the CDU rejected a motion calling for a limit of half a million euros for the annual salaries of the managers of HSH Nordbank, together with a ban on bonuses.

There is literally nothing progressive to have emerged from the rule of the Greens in Hamburg. Even its plan for the renting of bicycles in the city has no long-term future.

At the same time, the Greens have not entirely excluded the possibility of new alliances with the CDU. The Green Bundestag faction chairman Renate Künast commented: “We do not, however, have to slam the doors [on the CDU] at a state level, although the probabilities are sinking.” The Green leader in Hesse, Tarek Al-Wazir, said: “Immediate conclusions for federal politics would be wrong. We should not make ourselves once again into an appendage of the SPD.”

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