The fate of the Merkel coalition in Germany and the state election in Baden-Württemberg

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On Sunday, state elections will be held in Germany's Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. The election in Baden-Württemberg, above all, will have a direct impact on federal politics. After a series of electoral defeats, a loss of power in Stuttgart, the state capital of Baden-Württemberg, could be the nail in the coffin for the federal coalition under Angela Merkel.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Merkel's party, has been in power continuously since 1953 in Baden-Württemberg. It currently governs in coalition with the Free Democratic Party (FDP). The latest polls are forecasting 38 percent of the vote for the CDU, while the FDP may not clear the five percent hurdle to re-enter the state parliament. Five years ago, the FDP won 10.7 percent in their stronghold of Baden-Württemberg.

Polls forecast that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens will win between 47 and 48 percent combined, with the Greens ahead of the SPD in most polls. This could be the first time a state premier comes from the Green Party. But the formation of a government depends heavily on the performance of the Left Party, which is scraping along at the five percent level and could tip the balance should the party enter the state legislature.

The possible loss of power in Stuttgart coincides with the emergence of deep divisions in the CDU. The wing of the party associated with the most powerful business interests has long complained that Merkel has neither pruned social expenditure radically enough nor lowered taxes as promised.

The virtual abolition of conscription and the rescue fund set up for the euro, a fund to which Germany must make the largest contribution, met with rejection in sections of the CDU. Several prominent party members, including federal president Horst Köhler and Bundesbank [German central bank] president Axel Weber, have turned their backs on Merkel over these questions. The dispute over the resignation of Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, as the result of a plagiarism scandal, has also split the right-wing CDU.

Until recently, Merkel has been able to control the inner-party opposition, but in the past two weeks that has appeared to change.

First, the German chancellor's U-turn on nuclear policy met with bewilderment. Merkel responded to the disaster at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima with a three-month moratorium, reversing the recently adopted extension to the operating life of several nuclear power plants and temporarily shutting down the seven oldest German nuclear reactors. She has managed to alienate the opponents of nuclear power in her own ranks, who regard the sudden change as a cheap election campaign manoeuvre.

The CDU was then thoroughly divided when Germany abstained in the vote on attacking Libya in the UN Security Council. Leading party representatives accused the chancellor publically of abandoning Germany's long-standing foreign policy axis by abstaining alongside Russia and China and against traditional allies France, Britain and the US.

If the CDU now loses its stronghold in Baden-Württemberg, Merkel may not be able to calm her opponents inside the party.

There are also challenges ahead for Free Democratic Party Chairman Guido Westerwelle should his party fail to re-enter the Baden-Württemberg state parliament. It is the only state legislature in which the FDP has been represented continuously since 1945. Last year, there were already loud calls for Westerwelle to either resign his party post or his ministerial post.

The Merkel government is in a position similar to that faced by the coalition under her predecessor Gerhard Schröder in the summer of 2005. At that time, Schröder's SPD had suffered a series of defeats, and then lost the election in its stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia. The SPD-Green Party federal coalition was divided. Sections of the SPD were grumbling about Schröder's "Agenda 2010" welfare cuts, and the Greens rejected his foreign policy, which sought closer ties with Russia. Schröder finally threw in the towel, using a constitutionally questionable procedure to engineer the early dissolution of the Bundestag [German parliament] and so helped Merkel come to power.

Given the crisis of the CDU and FDP, the SPD and Greens are campaigning in Baden-Württemberg not as an opposition, but as responsible bourgeois parties, who would like to continue the policy of the previous government. Apart from certain minor promises, such as the abolition of tuition fees, their election programmes are no less hostile to the working class than those of the CDU and FDP.

After the launching of air strikes against Libya, the SPD and the Greens are also positioning themselves as supporters of the war who are strongly critical of Germany's abstention in the Security Council, while the CDU and FDP defend the attitude of the federal government. However, given the unpopularity of the war, the SPD and the Greens are trying to play down these questions.

The SPD slate is headed by 37-year-old lawyer Nils Schmid. In their manifesto, the Social Democrats—like the Greens—call for "sound finances" and are thus committed to budget cuts, which are prescribed by the constitutionally enshrined "debt brake".

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The lead candidate for the Greens, Winfried Kretschmann, is one of the sponsors of the 2009 constitutional amendment that brought in the debt brake. As a member of the Federalism Commission II, bringing together members of both houses of parliament, he was involved in drafting the constitutional amendment.

In an interview, the 62-year-old former school teacher described his party as “the only conservative party in the true sense”. He praised it as a better party of big business, because the Greens have shown how green ideas can be used to turn a profit. Only with green ideas could Germany “hold its position on the world markets”.

Kretschmann is one of those in the Green Party who for many years appealed for a coalition with the CDU. He claims that the CDU and the Greens are the only parties to “deal with the problems of the present”, and believes that “in very well-to-do circles” the desire for a coalition between the CDU and Greens is growing. In 2008, he had to backpedal on his calls for a coalition with the CDU. But such a coalition would not be excluded following Sunday’s election, should the appropriate political constellation exist in parliament.

The election campaign is focussed primarily on environmental issues and other topics which mainly arouse the middle class. Last year, the dispute over the Stuttgart 21 project, involving the building of a controversial new railway station, gave the Greens a boost. The opposition to the construction of a billion euro underground terminus also seized sections of traditional CDU voters. After mediation by the CDU politician Heiner Geissler, however, the issue disappeared from the spotlight and the Greens’ poll ratings fell again. Only the nuclear disaster in Japan has revived their fortunes.

The current state premier and CDU lead candidate, Stefan Mappus, is one of the most aggressive representatives of the nuclear lobby inside his party. Late last year, he arranged the purchase of 45 percent of the ENBW energy giant from the state-owned Electricité de France. Baden-Württemberg paid 4.7 billion euros, without Mappus informing the state legislature, let alone his own cabinet. ENBW operates four nuclear reactors, two of which are now scheduled to be shut down following the reversal of policy by the federal government, and the state government faces losses running into billions. Under these circumstances, Mappus says he has not changed his attitude on nuclear energy, and the Greens feel the wind in their sails.

Social issues affecting the general population, however, have found no expression in the election campaign. The CDU, which has close links with big business and industry, is presenting Baden-Württemberg as an unalloyed success story. And the economic policies of the SPD and the Greens are no different from those of the CDU.

Baden-Württemberg’s industrial centres are home to some of the most important companies in the German export industry. The mechanical engineering, automotive and metal working industries are especially well-represented. Even the largest European software company, SAP, has a considerable presence in the state. Nearly 40 percent of all employees in the state work in industry and commerce.

Average incomes are well above the German and European average and the unemployment rate is relatively low at 4.6 percent. But here too, social contradictions have intensified sharply in the recent period. According to official figures, eleven percent of the population are at risk of poverty.

The number of those whose jobs are at risk has risen sharply. Of 5.6 million people at work in the state in 2010, only 3.9 million have regular contracts with health and pension insurance. Temporary work and contract working have increased from 2009 to 2010 by 50 percent. Daimler Benz, the largest employer in the state, has signed an agreement with the IG Metall union providing that in future 8 percent of the workforce may consist of temporary workers. In this way, the company is able to deploy labour flexibly, hiring and firing, and pushing down wages. According to the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, a quarter of the total workforce in the state is on temporary contracts.

But these questions are not being made an issue in the election campaign. Only the Left Party has sporadically raised such questions, but only to nip any opposition in the bud and subordinate itself to the SPD.

The Left Party lead candidate is Roland Hamm, a former SPD member and long-time union official. In 1972, he was a member of the Jusos (Young Socialists), joining the SPD in 1976, and, in 1981, becoming a member of the IG Metall. The same year he became a union secretary in Aalen. In 2003, after almost 30 years, he left the SPD and joined the WASG, one of the components of what then became the Left Party. *Die Zeit* writes of the Left Party lead candidate: “The ex-SPD member sees himself as a realist, and points to his years of experience in local government”. His running mate is the sociologist Marta Aparicio.

Aparicio and Hamm told *ddp* news agency they would consider joining a Green Party-SPD-Left Party coalition, as well as using their votes to support a coalition of the SPD and Greens, as the Left Party is currently doing in North Rhine-Westphalia.

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