

Berlin election deals blow to federal coalition government

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The Berlin state election held on Sunday delivered a major blow to the federal coalition government headed by Angela Merkel. The party led by Chancellor Merkel, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), took second place with an estimated 23.2 percent of the vote—a slight increase over its vote in the last state election five years ago.

Its coalition partner, however, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), was hammered by the electorate, receiving just 1.9 percent—significantly below the 5 percent threshold for entering the state parliament and far less than the 7.8 percent the party received in the 2006 Berlin state election.

The FDP is the party in Germany most closely identified with a neo-liberal agenda and the interests of the financial elite. In the week leading up to the Berlin vote, FDP leader Philipp Rösler, Merkel's deputy chancellor, had attempted to revive his party's flagging fortunes by appealing to nationalist sentiment directed against Greece. He had suggested that the European Union oversee a "controlled" Greek default rather than extending the bailout of the country.

This campaign seriously backfired. The FDP, which throughout the post-World War Two period has been Germany's third party, is threatened with collapse. Its humiliation in Berlin means that it has failed to win enough support to enter state parliaments in five of the seven state elections held this year.

The strongest party in the election was the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which polled 28.6 percent (down from 30.8 percent in 2006). Its coalition partner in the Berlin Senate—the Left Party—received 11.6

percent, nearly 2 percent down from its total five years ago. Both coalition parties have been responsible for unprecedented cuts in the city's social welfare system during their ten years in power.

Now they are no longer able to continue their so-called "red-red" coalition. SPD Mayor Klaus Wowereit must form a coalition either with the Greens or with the CDU in order to establish a majority in the Berlin parliament.

The Greens came in third with 17.6 percent, overtaking the Left Party. While this result represents an improvement over its result at the last election, it is far below what party leaders had anticipated. At the start of the election campaign the Green leadership believed they could emerge as the overall winner.

Earlier this year the Greens made significant advances in the polls as a result of growing popular discontent with the ruling parties as well as concerns over nuclear power following the Fukushima disaster in Japan. In the Baden-Württemberg state election, the Green Party obtained the post of state premier for the first time in its history. The result in Berlin suggests that the party has reached its pinnacle and is now in decline.

One highly significant result was the 9 percent vote for the Pirate Party. Analyses of the vote for the party indicate that it attracted support particularly among voters under 35 and was able to draw votes from all of the main parties. The German Pirate Party, modeled after its Swedish predecessor, was formed in 2009 and campaigned principally on the issue of opposition to state interference with the Internet.

The vote for the party by a generation of youth who face increasingly precarious forms of cheap labor is an indication of broad discontent with the established political parties. At the same time, the fact that they voted for a party that has virtually no political program is a measure of the political confusion among these layers.

There are many signs that the Pirate Party will have a very short political half-life. Leading members of the party, who include former members of the conservative CDU and FDP, freely admit that they have no worked out policies regarding economic and social policy. With regard to the current economic crisis, the party has nothing to say.

The Berlin election result and the debacle for the FDP make the position of the federal coalition led by Angela Merkel increasingly untenable. In ten days the government faces a crucial vote to support the ailing euro by expanding the European Financial Stability Facility bailout fund. Leading members of Merkel's coalition, with Rösler to the fore, are openly campaigning against Merkel's policy, while both the SPD and Greens have promised to back her.

A decision by Wowerit for a grand coalition with the CDU would represent an imprimatur on the part of the SPD for such a coalition at a federal level. In 2008, it was a grand coalition of the SPD and CDU which came to the rescue of Germany's big banks and bailed them out with billions of taxpayer's money. In the wake of the bailout, the government introduced punitive budget cuts in order to restock the state treasury.

A grand coalition in Berlin and a renewed federal grand coalition would have the task this time round of intensifying the austerity measures in order to cope with an economic crisis that is spiraling out of control. Should Wowerit, in consultation with the national leadership of the SPD, decide against a partnership with the CDU, he will find a ready partner to undertake further social cuts and austerity policies in the Green Party.

The only party to take part in the Berlin election on

the basis of a socialist perspective was the Social Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). The PSG warned workers and youth in Berlin of the disastrous implications of the financial crisis and advanced a socialist and internationalist program, calling for the nationalization of the banks and major corporations and a united struggle with the working class of Greece and the whole of Europe on the basis of a struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

Despite a virtual blackout by the media, the party was able to carry out an ambitious and vigorous campaign centered mainly in three working class districts of Berlin.

On the day prior to the election, the PSG held a successful European workers' meeting in Berlin, which brought together supporters and delegations from Britain, France and Switzerland.

Exact figures on the party's result are not yet available, but initial figures indicate that the party received a small but significant vote that was considerably higher than the 573 votes it received in 2006



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