

# German election debate: A media spectacle to prepare a right-wing government

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On Sunday, a 90-minute television debate was held between Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and her Social Democratic Party (SPD) challenger, Peer Steinbrück. It was simultaneously broadcast by four major television networks.

The event was staged in the manner of an athletic competition. After each round of questions, the four moderators compared notes and sought to convey the impression of a significant clash between the head of government and her main opponent.

The opposite was the case, however. Merkel and Steinbrück, her former finance minister in Germany's last grand coalition government, agreed on all important political issues. When Steinbrück attacked Merkel's European policy, accusing her of a one-sided emphasis on debt-reduction and a lack of concern for growth, Merkel replied with a smile: "But you and the SPD, after all, have agreed to all the euro-stabilization programs, Mr. Steinbrück."

The same could be said for all other policy areas. Steinbrück rattled off some statistics on "low-paid temporary" and "anti-social" work contracts and warned of a growing division of society into rich and poor. At the same time, he praised former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010, which paved the way for the growth of Germany's cheap-labour sector and mass poverty, and accused Merkel of profiting from the policies introduced by Schröder's SPD-Green coalition.

Merkel, for her part, defended that government's "Agenda" policy and said she looked favourably on her collaboration with the SPD in the grand coalition. She indicated she was not averse to continuing the cooperation, based on the results of the September 22 election.

The most important point of agreement between Merkel and Steinbrück was to remain silent about what will come after Election Day. Their friendly exchanges, hackneyed

phrases and memorized sound bites were aimed at disguising the fact that the program of the next government, irrespective of its composition, will be dictated by the banks and big corporations and involve massive attacks on the working class.

At the centre of the TV event was a cover-up. Consistent with the entire election campaign, the debate reflected a conspiracy between the politicians and the media against the electorate. Political issues that might disturb the façade of harmony were avoided. No mention was made of the intensification of the international financial and economic crisis and its dramatic impact on the German export industry. Not a word was said about the crisis in the steel, auto and export industries, which are planning tens of thousands of layoffs.

While business federations are pressing for more deregulation of the labour market, plans are being drawn up by the Finance Ministry for a second debt restructuring for Greece. In order to shift the financial burden of such measures onto the population, austerity programs are being developed that are directed not just against the Greek and Spanish workers, but also against the German working class.

This means that major class struggles are on the agenda. The next government will resort to dictatorial measures to impose these attacks. But this theme was entirely avoided in the Sunday debate.

The conspiracy of silence was most evident in the treatment of the issue of war. The TV debate took place on a historic date. Seventy-four years previously, German troops invaded Poland and commenced World War II. Every year since then, commemorative events have been held, accompanied by the unctuous speeches of parliamentary deputies.

This year, the anniversary coincided with the preparations for war against Syria. Under the leadership of the US, Western powers are preparing an imperialist

crime that can quickly escalate into a war with Iran and Russia. Ten years ago, the German federal government argued against involvement in the Iraq war and abstained in 2011 from participating in the war against Libya. These decisions are now almost universally deemed within the political and media establishment to have been major foreign policy mistakes.

Today, all official parties and major media outlets are backing Washington's war policy against Syria. There are strong indications that the German election could coincide with the bombing of Damascus, under conditions where both the government and the opposition support an act of military aggression, over the intense opposition of the German population, which could trigger a Third World War.

This issue was dealt with only fleetingly during the debate. Some 80 minutes of the 90-minute broadcast had passed before the moderators raised the issue of German participation in a war against Syria. Both Merkel and Steinbrück gave short and identical replies, i.e., that the poison gas attack should not go unpunished and Germany supported US plans for military intervention. At the same time, both speakers argued for a United Nations mandate. No further questions, no further discussion.

Apparently, there was a prior agreement not to discuss the issue. Nevertheless, it was clear that both the government and the opposition are determined to press ahead with support for aggression against Syria despite massive popular opposition.

This basic agreement, however, applies not only to the question of war, but also to all other areas of policy. Merkel and Steinbrück will be no less aggressive in attacking the German working class than they are in supporting military action against Syria.

Steinbrück tried to present himself as the more aggressive and uncompromising candidate. On several occasions he accused the chancellor of political vacillation and waiting until the logic of events forced her to make a decision. This is the opposite of leadership, he declared. Germany was too important a country to accept this kind of "political moderation." The "voice of Germany in Europe and the world" is too important to continue a policy of hesitation and vacillation, he argued.

The arguments of the SPD candidate were directed less to the public than to the ruling class. His reference to growing poverty as a result of temporary contract work and other precarious forms of employment was not followed by promises of new social programs. On the contrary, he warned of major social convulsions and class

confrontations that would, he hinted, require an authoritarian government ready to respond with a heavy hand.

In the post-debate commentaries, the media praised Steinbrück. Although the SPD, with 23 percent in the opinion polls, is trailing well behind the conservative "union parties" (the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union--CSU), with 41 percent, commentators declared that the election result remained in doubt. They argued that a majority of voters made their decision on the day of the election, a lot could happen before then, etc., etc.

The history of the German Federal Republic makes clear that the SPD was repeatedly entrusted with government power at important political turning points. In the late 1960s, when rebellious students and workers took to the streets in response to a serious economic crisis, the first-ever Social Democratic chancellor, Willy Brandt, took the reins of power. Brandt's Ostpolitik ("Turn to the East") opened up new markets for German industry. At the same time, his education reforms, involving new universities, plus an expansion of the public sector assisted in "getting the youth off the streets."

Thirty years later, when state debts had grown enormously following the reunification of Germany, and the economy was stagnating, the first ever SPD-Green government, led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens), took power. It introduced the biggest-ever attacks on the post-war German welfare state (the "Hartz IV" laws and "Agenda 2010"), creating the conditions for a huge low-wage sector and making Germany the most unequal country in Europe.

Now, business associations and influential sections of the ruling class are once again demanding a more aggressive domestic and foreign policy, with some layers backing the SPD. However, any combination of parties that comes to power will be prepared to follow a similar course. Alternatives include a coalition of the conservative parties with the Greens, a new version of the Grand coalition (i.e., the SPD and the conservative parties), or a continuation of the current coalition of the CDU-CSU with the free market Free Democratic Party.



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