

The significance of the German election

Peter Schwarz**21 September 2013**

On Sunday, a new parliament (Bundestag) will be elected in Germany. According to the polls, Angela Merkel is likely to remain chancellor. Her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) are expected to win around 40 percent of the vote, with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) taking second place with well below 30 percent.

It is unclear whether Merkel's current coalition partner, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), will obtain the five percent vote necessary to enter the Bundestag or win sufficient seats to hold onto its current position in the CDU-CSU-FDP coalition.

If the FDP fails to do so, the only possible alternatives are a grand coalition of the CDU-CSU and SPD—the constellation which, under Merkel's leadership, governed Germany from 2005 to 2009—or a coalition of the CDU-CSU and Greens. The SPD and Greens have ruled out any collaboration with the Left Party, which might have enabled them to achieve a majority and exclude the CDU. Should the euro-skeptical Alternative for Germany enter parliament for the first time, it is likely that the only basis for a new government will be a grand coalition.

Regardless of its composition, the new government will differ greatly from its predecessor. It will not only intensify the ruthless austerity policies Germany is imposing on Europe, it will declare war on the working class within Germany itself. It will also abandon any military restraint and aggressively pursue the interests of German imperialism internationally.

The establishment parties agree on all these issues—from the CDU-CSU and the FDP to the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party. This consensus between the parties was expressed during the campaign by their refusal to raise any of these issues. They agreed to remain silent, well aware of the huge popular opposition to austerity and militarism.

Election posters were emblazoned with meaningless

slogans such as “It's We Who Decide” and “Successful Together.” Political debates discussed the color of Angela Merkel's necklace, a provocative pose struck by SPD candidate Peer Steinbrück, and the pedophilic misdemeanors of the Greens in the 1980s. None of the parties addressed the social disaster in Greece, raging social inequality in Germany, the continuing crisis of the euro or the threat of war against Syria.

The more violent the bickering on secondary and tertiary issues, the more difficult it was to discern differences between the parties on fundamental questions. The SPD's leading candidate Steinbrück had served as finance minister from 2005 to 2009 in the grand coalition led by Merkel and is closer to her than many of her own party members. The Greens are among the most ardent advocates of “humanitarian” war and strict budgetary discipline. They criticize Merkel on these issues from the right. For its part, the Left Party made endless offers to cooperate with the SPD and the Greens, exposing its talk of progressive social reform as complete hypocrisy.

With the parties holding back because they feared losing votes, it was left to the media to formulate the program of the future government. The common theme of media commentaries was that the current government was far too hesitant and lacked the courage to take unpopular measures.

At the beginning of August, *Der Spiegel* magazine deplored the “political cowardice” of the parties, denouncing them for adapting to the citizens’ “unwillingness to reform.” The 84-year-old philosopher Jürgen Habermas lamented the failure of the elite to make unpopular decisions and assert a leading role for Germany in Europe.

The latest edition of *Die Zeit* complains that the German Republic is “ruled today by a coalition that has failed to formulate any domestic reform program and

recoils from taking up its international responsibility.” It bemoans the fact that Germany now has a professional army, but “at the same time a foreign policy that is determined never to use it.”

When US President Obama threatened to bomb Syria, a universal agitation for war swept through the newspapers. Major papers such as the *taz*, *Süddeutsche*, *Tagesspiegel*, *Die Welt* and *Die Zeit* all joined the chorus for war, demanding a military strike with German participation. *Die Zeit* editor Josef Joffe railed against Obama’s “mini-war” and demanded a massive military offensive “with an open-ended time scale.” He declared: “Whoever undertakes to defend the interests of the people must remain ready for the next intervention. Whoever starts with A must complete the entire alphabet.”

Calls for authoritarian policies at home combined with an aggressive foreign policy are the response by the ruling class to the deepest crisis of capitalism since the eve of World War II. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the German government has imposed ruthless austerity measures throughout Europe in order to recover the 1.6 trillion euros made available to banks. In so doing, it has produced an unprecedented social disaster.

At the end of last year, one in four Europeans lived at or below the poverty line. That’s 121 million people.

While broad sections of the population are condemned to poverty, the top layers of society have enriched themselves without restraint. The markets are celebrating an orgy of speculation and thereby preparing the next financial debacle. In the week before the election, the German DAX stock index reached an historic high, even though the German economy will grow this year by just 0.3 percent.

The austerity measures have not resolved, but deepened the crisis of capitalism. It is an open secret that Greece and Portugal will need new bailouts immediately after the election, leading to deep holes in the budgets of all European Union countries and even more social cuts.

As was the case eighty years ago, the ruling class is responding to the crisis of its system with preparations for war and dictatorship. Many of its representatives regard a grand coalition as the best variant to advance such a policy. It would have a secure majority in the Bundestag and also in Germany’s second house, the

Bundesrat, where SPD-led states are in a majority. Such a coalition could rely on a loyal opposition in the form of the Greens and the Left Party.

A grand coalition would function largely independently of the will of voters and have an authoritarian character. It would also, however, be a government of crisis. The gulf between the political parties and the broad mass of the population would deepen even more than is currently the case. This would place open class struggle on the agenda.

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) is the only party to intervene in the parliamentary elections in order to prepare the working class for such struggles. It advances a program that focuses on the political independence of the working class. As the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, it fights to unite workers in Europe and worldwide. Its aim is the establishment of workers’ governments that will expropriate the banks and big corporations and reorganize society on a socialist basis, i.e., according to the needs of society rather than the profit interests of the banks and big business.

We call on all WSWs readers in Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse to vote for the PSG. We call on voters in those states where we are not standing to write in our party name on your ballot papers. Above all, we call upon you to join and help build the PSG.



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