

Why Merkel won the German elections

Ulrich Rippert**24 September 2013**

The German elections last Sunday had many special features. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), which has consistently sat in the Bundestag (parliament) since 1949 and been involved in more post-war governments than any other party, failed to clear the 5 percent hurdle required to enter parliament. The FDP is the German party that most blatantly represents the interests of finance capital.

The new anti-euro party “Alternative for Germany” (AFD), founded just a few months ago, secured almost as many votes as the FDP and narrowly missed a place in the Bundestag.

But most striking was the victory of Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The party whose brutal austerity measures have triggered violent protests and mass demonstrations in many European countries was able, together with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), to increase its share of the vote by 8 percent.

In contrast, the parties which acted as a supposedly left-wing opposition were punished by the voters. The Greens and the Left Party lost significantly, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) received 25.7 percent of the vote, which despite a minimal gain was its second-worst election result in the post-war period. The reason is not hard to understand: the SPD, Greens and Left Party are neither left-wing nor an opposition.

The SPD is a party of the state apparatus and the trade union bureaucracy that has lost all contact with the population, which it confronts with arrogance and hubris. This is how it was regarded in the election campaign. The SPD accused Merkel of not having the courage to impose on the German population the cuts she imposed on Greece, Spain and Portugal. It selected Peer Steinbrück, a right-wing ministerial official, as its candidate for chancellor—someone who personifies the ruthlessness and aggressiveness of the state apparatus.

During the campaign former SPD Interior Minister

Otto Schily attacked criticisms of the surveillance by the secret services as paranoid, adding that law and order had always been a social-democratic value. In so doing he summed up the SPD’s programme.

As the inevitability of the SPD’s defeat became apparent, Steinbrück attacked his own party. He said he wished that the SPD had been more confident and consistent in representing “the great achievements” of the SPD-Green era, and specifically its anti-welfare Agenda program.

The Greens appeared as the embodiment of political opportunism during the election campaign. The former pacifists are now among the most ardent advocates of “humanitarian” wars and strict budgetary discipline. The party’s ranks consist mainly of academics and senior state officials, who call for more political influence for the intellectual elite.

Leading Greens responded to the party’s loss of votes with another shift to the right, declaring that the party’s proposal for a tax increase on the rich was its biggest mistake. The party’s lead candidate Jürgen Trittin and fellow party leader Cem Özdemir promptly paid tribute to Chancellor Merkel, stressing their readiness to form a coalition government with the CDU/CSU.

The most mendacious role in the election campaign was played by the Left Party. It unceasingly offered the SPD and the Greens its cooperation and support. Party leader Gregor Gysi declared the SPD and the Greens could best achieve *their* policies in alliance with the Left Party, thus exposing the Left Party’s talk about improving social conditions as hypocritical.

Steinbrück and Trittin both bowed to demands from the media and employers’ associations for “more courage to take unpopular measures”, and were supported by the Left Party. Under these conditions, Angela Merkel could pose as a level-headed politician who “responsibly directs [the country] with a steady hand”, as she said on election night.

In other words, Merkel's election victory is primarily the result of the complete political bankruptcy of the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens.

The right-wing policies of the SPD, Greens and Left Party were particularly evident in foreign policy matters. It would not be the first time in history that a sharp swing to the right in German politics was initiated on foreign policy issues.

For some time, the US government has been calling for greater German participation in Middle East wars, complaining that Chancellor Merkel takes too much notice of anti-war sentiment in the German population. This demand has found support in media outlets close to the SPD and the Greens, such as *Zeit* and *taz*. When President Obama threatened to bomb Syria, they responded with pages of unprecedented war propaganda.

They mocked the hesitation and reluctance of the Merkel government. *Zeit* editor Josef Joffe denounced Obama's "mini-war", calling for a "massive" war "on an open-ended time scale."

If Merkel, who needs a new coalition partner following the departure of the FDP, agrees to a coalition government with the SPD, this would be a clear sign of a more aggressive German military stance. The SPD, which together with the Greens ordered the first international war mission by the Bundeswehr (armed forces) against Yugoslavia 15 years ago, has the all the necessary ruthlessness and bureaucratic arrogance to defy deep popular opposition and go to war.

The next government's programme will be determined firstly by the growing international tensions, and then by the rapid worsening of the global economic crisis. Even now, employers' organizations are demanding massive cuts in social services in the name of international competitiveness.

So far, the Merkel government had shifted the economic crisis, in part, onto southern Europe. Now the new government will seek to advance the social counterrevolution at home. Sick pay, legal protections against dismissal, maternity leave, statutory social security support, etc.—measures already undermined by Germany's low-wage and precarious employment sector—are now to be abolished.

There is not a single party in the spectrum of official politics that expresses the interests of working people

in even the most elementary fashion. In a paradoxical way, the election result reflects the extreme polarization of society. It makes clear that the political system has lost all ability to express growing opposition to social inequality and war.

The media is celebrating Merkel as a political genius, and the large CDU/CSU vote as the beginning of the "era of Merkel-ism", as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote. But what superficially looks like stability is, in truth, the result of a profound alienation between the political system and the population, heralding a period of political instability and violent social conflict.

The working class must prepare for massive attacks.

This was the political significance of the participation in the elections of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party). The PSG was the only party to address the fundamental problems facing the working class. It emphasized that no single social problem can be resolved without breaking the dictatorship of the banks, and that this requires the independent movement of the working class, which means a political break with the Left Party and the trade unions.

This requires the building of the PSG, the German section of the Fourth International, as a new workers' party based on the political lessons of past class struggles, and an international socialist programme.



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