

Germany: The significance of the election in Lower Saxony

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Tomorrow's election in the state of Lower Saxony has far greater importance than appears at first sight. Germany's federal (Bundestag) election took place three weeks ago, but negotiations on the formation of a "Jamaica" coalition—comprising the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU), the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens—have been postponed until the outcome in Lower Saxony is known.

Influential circles of the ruling class intend to use tomorrow's result to facilitate a complete realignment of the government at the federal level. If the Social Democratic Party (SPD) emerges as the front-ranking party in Lower Saxony, as polls are predicting, then SPD leader Martin Schulz's announcement that the Social Democrats would not participate in the next federal administration would be called into question.

Former SPD chairman and acting Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has stated already that the decision to rule out participation in government was somewhat premature, and influenced by the party's miserable election result. Gabriel, whose political base resides in Lower Saxony, said: "The hangover is yet to come." The SPD, he inferred, would regret its decision.

The SPD-Green state administration in Lower Saxony collapsed at the beginning of August, almost two months before the Bundestag election. A Green deputy, Elke Twesten, announced she was switching parties and joining the conservative CDU. This meant the state government in Hanover headed by SPD premier Stephan Weil lost its slender majority of one seat and was forced to call an early election.

There were many indications at the time that Twesten's switch of parties was the result of political intrigue. She held talks with the CDU some weeks before her decision and rumours circulated that her

change of faction was bound up with career prospects and lucrative job offers.

Right-wing elements in the CDU and the media saw an opportunity to further weaken the SPD on the eve of the Bundestag elections and thereby prevent any continuation of its "grand coalition" with the conservative CDU-CSU. A "business as usual" attitude was no longer permissible was the mantra of many comments. The grand coalition was described as too cumbersome and incapable of fulfilling Germany's ambitious domestic and foreign policy agendas. The same accusation was levelled against Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has governed for two-thirds of her 12-year term in an alliance with the SPD. A new coalition and a charismatic leader were necessary.

Three months later, the media, which applauded the fall of the SPD-Green state government, has little to say about the SPD election campaign in Lower Saxony. The *Bild* newspaper commissioned an opinion poll and ran the headline a few days later: "SPD leads CDU in Lower Saxony." The CDU had lost a 12-point advantage in Lower Saxony within two months. For the first time since April, the SPD was leading the polls with 33 percent.

The main reason for the media about-turn is the dramatic intensification of the international crisis and the growing danger of war.

In this context, a comment by Gabor Steingart in the *Handelsblatt* is noteworthy. The editor of Germany's leading business newspaper warned that the "political hurricane" raging between the US State Department, the White House and Capitol Hill would affect Europe very soon and very powerfully. He wrote: "It is an issue of war or peace, even if is obscured behind a smokescreen of personal accusations."

US President Donald Trump's uncontrolled verbal

attacks on other countries, Steingart declared, risked opening the way “to a Third World War.” In the face of this “coming storm,” Germany appeared drugged with the “narcotics” known as party politics, and petty interests and bickering dominated. As a result, he wrote, “the American storm petrel, which presages the coming disaster, remains unobserved.” For the sake of convenience, the German establishment was underestimating Trump and minimising the danger of war.

Steingart ended by citing the well-known author Sebastian Haffner, who described the atmosphere of the pre-World War II years in his memoirs, *The Story of a German*. Haffner’s references to the “deliberate ignorance” which prevailed at that time, Steingart concluded, “recalls our present situation.”

The article demonstrated that sections of the ruling class want to keep open the option of a continued CDU-SPD grand coalition. A “Jamaica” coalition of four parties has never been attempted before in post-war Germany. It could prove extremely unstable due to internal conflicts. In addition, FDP leader Christian Lindner and Green leader Cem Özdemir, who expect to fill leading ministerial posts, are considered to be weak and inexperienced when it comes to dealing with the challenges posed by the growing danger of world war.

There are also foreign policy differences within the ruling class. Foreign Minister Gabriel and the SPD regard close cooperation with France as the best prerequisite for developing Germany into a military and political world power. They therefore support President Emmanuel Macron’s proposal to establish a European finance ministry and a budget for the eurozone. They are also looking at the advantages of collaboration with a state that has nuclear weapons.

This spring, *Die Zeit*, wrote that “non-nuclear states like Germany face a deep dilemma” should the US no longer unconditionally guarantee their security. The newspaper, which is close to the SPD, raised the possibility of Germany co-financing the planned modernisation of France’s nuclear arsenal in exchange for the German government having limited powers to influence French policy.

The FDP, the CSU and sections of the CDU, on the other hand, strongly reject Macron’s plans. They fear Germany will be swept into the vortex of the next financial crisis if it has to provide financial support to

France and other European Union countries. German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) expressed his opposition to Macron’s proposal and instead demanded sharper control of finances by a European Monetary Fund.

Gabriel sharply criticised Schäuble over his statements. The Greens tend to be closer to the SPD on this issue, while Chancellor Merkel has so far remained silent.

All parties agree that the next federal government must engage in a massive program of rearmament at home and abroad. The dispute, however, is how to best realise this policy and the associated attacks on the working class. Should the SPD go into opposition and open the way for a coalition of the CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens? Or should it participate in government in a coalition of the conservative Union parties in a kind of national unity government, in close collaboration with the German Federation of Trade Unions?

In 1999, a SPD-Green coalition paved the way for Germany’s first ever post-war foreign military mission. In 2014, former foreign minister and the current German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier took the lead in further militarising the country. Today, his successor, Sigmar Gabriel, is the chief advocate of an aggressive German foreign policy.

Whatever federal government emerges after the election in the Lower Saxony on Sunday, it will be a right-wing government, focussed on military rearmament, preparation for war and police repression.



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