Social-democrats win narrow plurality in fragmented German elections

Johannes Stern
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The result of yesterday's German federal election reflects deep popular alienation from all the parliamentary parties and ushers in a period of political instability and sharp class conflict.

Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and their candidate, Armin Laschet, suffered a historic debacle. After 16 years with Merkel as Chancellor, the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU) received less than one-quarter of all votes cast, with 24.1 percent. The CDU/CSU lost more than eight percent of the vote, compared to its previous worst-ever performance in the last elections in 2017 (32.9 percent). In 2013, the party could still muster 41.5 percent of the vote.

The German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), the second so-called "People's Party," received barely over one-quarter of all votes cast, at 25.7 percent. The Social-Democrats and their Chancellor candidate, Olaf Scholz, were able to improve their share of the vote compared to their historically worst result four years ago (20.5 percent), but they did not win layers of non-voting workers. The lion's share of new SPD voters (1.3 million) came from former CDU voters.

Its "election victory" notwithstanding, the SPD is hated by workers and youth. The party of the Hartz welfare reforms, tax handouts to the super-rich and the increase in the retirement age to 67, the SPD bears chief responsibility for deep social inequality in Germany. Scholz, the incumbent finance minister, is the architect of the billions of euros in handouts to large corporations and banks and the massive rearmament drive of recent years.

Only the Left Party is more bankrupt than the SPD. It achieved its worst-ever result, losing almost half of its votes (-4.3 percent) from 2017. With 4.9 percent, it missed the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation in the end. However, the party will still be represented in the next parliament because it managed to win three direct mandates, which means the 5 percent hurdle no longer applies.

The reason for the Left Party's debacle is clear. Amid the pandemic, widespread social inequality and the growing danger of war, the ex-Stalinists, worn-out social democrats and pseudo-lefts were neither willing nor able to appeal to the enormous social and political opposition in the population.

In states where the Left Party already governs, it cuts social spending, brutally deports refugees, and pursues the murderous policy of mass infection amid the pandemic. In the election campaign, their candidates campaigned for a SPD/Green/Left Party coalition (a so-called Red-Red-Green government) at every opportunity, signalling their support for NATO and German imperialism to the ruling class.

The AfD's election result (10.3 percent) underlines just how hated the entire ruling class' right-wing politics are. Though the right-wing extremists are constantly courted in the media, and the established parties systematically integrate them into the political system and adopt their agenda, the AfD lost votes. The far-right party lost over two percent of the vote in the federal election, and 4 and 6 percent respectively in state elections held simultaneously in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin.

However, this does not eliminate the danger posed by the far-right. On the contrary. The ruling class is reacting to the deep crisis of capitalism, the escalating tensions between the major powers and the global growth of the class struggle by ever more openly adopting the program of the right-wing extremists.

This is particularly evident in the current pandemic. Significantly, on the evening of the election, not a single leading politician said a word about the coronavirus pandemic, which has cost almost 100,000 lives in Germany alone. All parties, from the CDU/CSU to the Left Party, support the murderous reopening policy of allowing the virus to spread, which puts profits before life and, at its core, bears the signature of the AfD.

This political course, paired with violent social attacks and a major strengthening of the military abroad and repressive state apparatus at home, is now to be continued and intensified. On the evening of the election, Scholz and Laschet formulated competing claims to lead the next federal government and to quickly initiate exploratory and

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coalition talks with the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens. Both parties are open to such talks.

The Greens, who gained almost 6 percent and achieved their best result to date in federal elections with 14.6 percent, made clear that they are ready for a coalition. “We want to govern,” said the co-leader of the Greens Robert Habeck. There is “close proximity to the SPD,” Habeck continued, but an alliance with the FDP is also possible under the leadership of the CDU/CSU.

Christian Lindner, the lead candidate and chairman of the FDP, which achieved 11.5 percent (+0.8 percent) of the vote, told ZDF television that he saw the greatest agreement in terms of content in a so-called Jamaica coalition of CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens. But Lindner did not rule out talks with the SPD either. Earlier in the evening, he announced in the “Berlin Roundtable” that the “Greens and FDP will talk to each other first” about how they intend to proceed.

All parties agree on the basic political issues and only differ in nuances. Nevertheless, the formation of a government could take months, just as it did four years ago. In mathematical terms, a continuation of the CDU-SPD grand coalition would also be possible. However, there are many indications that Germany will be governed by a three-party alliance for the first time since the 1950s.

Turning to the issue of forming a new government, Scholz warned in the “Berlin Roundtable” that everything must now be done “so that we are ready before Christmas.” A “little bit beforehand would also be good,” he added.

Laschet pointed out that Germany would hold the G7 presidency in 2022. This is one of the reasons why “the new government must come into office very soon” and the coalition negotiations must “definitely be (ended) before Christmas.”

Two key developments are driving the ruling class. On the one hand, it fears that a prolonged period of political instability could provoke escalating resistance in the working class. The election campaign was already marked by strikes and protests for higher wages and safe and decent working conditions. The strikes by train drivers, delivery workers and carers are part of an international upsurge in the class struggle.

On the other hand, the bourgeoisie’s struggle for geostrategic and economic interests does not brook interruption. In his speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York on Friday, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) made clear one central task of the next federal government. Regardless of the colour, it will accelerate Germany’s return to an aggressive, great-power foreign policy.

Steinmeier shed a few crocodile tears over the imperialist debacle in Afghanistan, only to then declare that the policy of military intervention, which has destroyed entire countries, killed millions and turned tens of millions into refugees, must continue. He was “convinced: resignation would be the wrong doctrine. In my eyes, this moment of geopolitical disenchantment means three things for our foreign policy: We have to become more honest, smarter, but also stronger!”

By this Steinmeier means above all the foreign policy and military strengthening of Europe. “German and European foreign policy” should “not be limited to being right and condemning others. But we have to expand our toolbox -- diplomatic, military, civil, humanitarian,” he explained. “We have to become stronger in our possibilities.” That is why Germany is also investing “more in its defense capabilities in these unstable times.”

The working class cannot stand idly by while the intrigues and manoeuvres gather pace behind the scenes to install the next government of German imperialism and finance capital. It must intervene independently in political events and counter the reactionary plans of the ruling class with its own program.

This is the importance of the SGP’s election campaign. We took part in the elections to provide a voice and socialist perspective to the opposition to the shift to the right, the policy of mass infection and inequality. We received 1,535 votes for our state lists in North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin, about 250 more than in the last federal election.

This offensive must now be continued. In our statement on the eve of the election, we wrote: “The struggle for this socialist perspective does not end on September 26. We are fighting for every vote because a strong result for the SGP is an important sign of growing opposition to mass infection, inequality and war. But the crucial task is to prepare workers for the class struggles ahead and to build the SGP and the Fourth International as the new socialist leadership in the working class.”

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