

German federal elections: Social Democrats and Christian Democrats agree on all key issues

Peter Schwarz
12 February 2025

The 90-minute debate between Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats, SPD) and his potential successor Friedrich Merz (Christian Democrats, CDU), broadcast by ARD on Sunday evening during prime time, was trailed as a “duel.” It was anything but.

Scholz and Merz agreed on all major issues and tried to outmanoeuvre each other from the right. Issues affecting millions—rising prices and rents, increasing poverty and declining pensions, the education and healthcare crisis, mass layoffs in the automotive and supplier industries, and the climate crisis—were either not addressed at all or only touched upon briefly.

Instead, the debate focused on inciting hatred against migrants, rearmament, and cuts in social provisions. While nearly a million people across Germany took to the streets for the second consecutive weekend to protest against the cooperation between the CDU and far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Merz and Scholz bragged about being even tougher on refugees than the right-wing extremists.

Merz reiterated his demand for sealing off Germany’s external borders; for his part, Scholz emphasized that his government had increased deportations by almost 70 percent. “There have never been tougher laws than the ones I have implemented,” he boasted, accusing Merz of grandstanding by blocking stricter security laws in the Bundesrat (upper chamber of parliament).

The only point of disagreement was that Merz supports closing Germany’s borders, whereas Scholz wants to deter refugees at Europe’s frontiers to avoid jeopardizing European unity under growing pressure from the United States.

The campaign against refugees serves to scapegoat migrants for the social crisis and divide the working class in order to dismantle social and democratic achievements. This was particularly evident in the debate on “Bürgergeld,” the social welfare payments that replaced unemployment benefits (Hartz IV) and social assistance in 2022 under the Scholz government.

Merz wants to cut billions in spending by forcing Bürgergeld recipients into low-wage jobs, claiming, “We have 1.7 million Bürgergeld recipients who could actually work.” Scholz did not counter this but instead backed Merz, saying, “I believe that those who can work should do so,” and boasted that he was the toughest politician in Germany in cracking down on alleged fraud in the Bürgergeld system.

Scholz and Merz also share nearly identical views on defence and foreign policy. Both insist on continuing Germany’s massive rearmament spending after expiration of the €100 billion “Special Fund” for the Bundeswehr (armed forces) and committing at least 2 percent of GDP (some even speak of 3 to 5 percent) to defence spending, requiring a dramatic increase in the regular military budget.

Scholz still tries to create the illusion that this can be achieved by modifying the debt brake without corresponding social cuts, while Merz openly states that increasing military expenditures will necessitate cuts elsewhere in the budget.

Scholz’s assurances that he would not fund military expansion at the expense of social spending are entirely unconvincing. Under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998 to 2005), the SPD oversaw the greatest social redistribution of wealth in Germany’s history. Massive tax cuts for the wealthy, coupled with the Hartz “reforms” curbing benefits, fostering a low-pay sector and limiting workers’ employment rights, significantly widened the gap between rich and poor.

From 2005 to 2021, the SPD continued these policies in a Grand Coalition led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), under whom Scholz served as labour minister from 2007 to 2009 and later as finance minister from 2018, until he was elected chancellor in 2021. Under his leadership, Germany’s poverty rate has risen to over 21 percent.

Now, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of regular jobs in the automotive, supplier and chemical industries is adding to this crisis, a trend that could worsen dramatically due to the threat of punitive tariffs from Trump.

Yet, this issue was not addressed in the debate between Scholz and Merz. While Merz proposed tax cuts of €20 billion for the wealthy to “stimulate the economy,” Scholz wants to retain businesses in the country with a “Made in Germany” bonus. Both approaches amount to channelling even more public funds into the pockets of billionaires and oligarchs.

On war policy, there is not a sliver of daylight between Scholz and Merz. Both want to escalate the war in Ukraine, particularly if the Trump administration withdraws support. Both favour a unified European military approach under German leadership.

They also share unconditional support for Israel, despite the increasingly evident genocidal nature of its war against the

Palestinians. While both rejected Trump's proposal to annex Gaza and turn it into a "Riviera of the Middle East," they primarily opposed this because it impinges upon German interests. Scholz called it a "scandal," and Merz agreed, though he downplayed it as "a lot of rhetoric."

Otherwise, Trump remained the elephant in the room. Neither moderators Maybrit Illner and Sandra Maischberger nor Scholz and Merz acknowledged that Germany's closest ally, the US, is led by a fascist president. Moreover, one who is dismantling the US Constitution, waging war against the American working class and the world and even interfering heavily in February's federal election campaign in Germany, in which Trump's close associate Elon Musk is actively promoting the AfD.

The reason for this silence is simple: German politics is moving in the same direction as Trump. His return to the White House is no accident—he embodies the interests of American finance capital, which now sees its profits as only defensible through dictatorial means and military force.

The Democrats offer no real opposition, as they too serve Wall Street and the military. This has allowed Trump to win over voters through populist demagoguery. His regime represents not democracy but the dictatorship of the billionaire oligarchs backing him. Only the working class can resist this trend.

In Germany and across Europe, the ruling class is following the same path. Far-right parties and their policies are being promoted everywhere. On Saturday, right-wing extremists from across Europe gathered in Madrid to celebrate Trump's victory. "Yesterday we were heretics; today we are the mainstream," Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared.

Orbán was joined by Marine Le Pen from France, Geert Wilders from the Netherlands, and Matteo Salvini from Italy. Austria's designated Chancellor Herbert Kickl addressed the gathering via video. The event was hosted by Spain's far-right Vox party. The AfD was excluded only because Le Pen fears that association with a German party that openly downplays the Nazis could harm her chances in France's next presidential election.

Scholz and Merz treated each other so cordially because they aim to continue the Grand Coalition, which governed Germany between 2005 and 2021, with only a four-year interruption. With the collapse of the coalition of the SPD, Greens, and Liberal Democrats (FDP), the CDU and SPD (or possibly the CDU and Greens) have the best chance of winning a majority in the February 23 Bundestag elections.

Polls have long shown the CDU at around 30 percent, the SPD at 16 percent, and the Greens at 14 percent. If the FDP, Left Party and Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), all hovering just below the 5 percent hurdle, fail to enter the Bundestag, a CDU-SPD coalition could secure a majority—unless the CDU opts for a coalition with the AfD, which is currently polling at around 20 percent.

Even mainstream media see it this way. According to the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the debate was less a duel than a negotiation between future partners. "Merz tailored everything he said to align with the SPD as a coalition partner. ... Thus, the duel with Scholz feigned a disparity that does not exist." The paper wryly suggested, "Olaf-Friedrich Merzscholz" might be

the ideal German chancellor.

However, a new version of the Grand Coalition will not mark a return to the Merkel era. As the debate between Scholz and Merz demonstrates, it will be far more right-wing than its predecessors, aiming to expand Germany's military, suppress resistance to militarism and social attacks, and further empower the AfD.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is the only party countering this rightward shift with a socialist program. In its election statement, it states:

There is no such thing as a "lesser evil" in this election. All the establishment parties are committed to making Germany "war-ready" (kriegstüchtig) again and shifting the costs onto workers, pensioners and the needy. The mass layoffs and radical wage cuts at VW are only the beginning. For this frontal attack on the working class, they rely on the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)—whether as part of the government or not. All other parties have already embraced the AfD's anti-refugee propaganda and law-and-order policies. Their aim is to divide the working class, incite a right-wing mob and strengthen the repressive state apparatus.

The SGP rejects the illusion that the establishment parties can be compelled to change course through moral appeals or pressure from below. Our election campaign is directed at the working class and youth—at all those who refuse to accept the genocidal pro-war policy, the stark levels of social inequality, the destruction of health and education systems and the devastation of our planet.

The international working class is a formidable social force, comprising 3.5 billion people—55 percent more than in 1991. It creates all social wealth while bearing the entire burden of war and crisis. Only if the working class intervenes independently in political life and transforms society on a revolutionary basis—expropriating the big banks and corporations and placing them under democratic control—can catastrophe be averted.

Such a movement has already begun. From the United States to Europe, Asia and Africa, fierce industrial struggles are emerging, increasingly coming into open conflict with the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy. Despite brutal repression, millions have protested against the genocide in Gaza. The central task is to unite these struggles internationally, arm them with a socialist perspective and build a new socialist mass party. This is the goal of our election campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact