

Germany: Grand Coalition voted out

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Despite Angela Merkel's re-election for a fourth successive term, there can be no doubt that a political earthquake has shaken Germany. The ruling Grand Coalition, based on the conservative CDU-CSU and the social-democratic SPD, was voted out of office, with its parties losing a combined 13.8 percent of the vote, falling from 67.2 per cent to 53.5 per cent.

The Christian Democratic Union, CDU, and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, CSU, announced that they had achieved their three "strategic election goals"; they remain the strongest party in the Bundestag, without which no government coalition can be formed, and they have also blocked the formation of an SPD-Left Party-Green Party government. Since it will at least head the next government, the CDU-CSU can declare itself the victor with this result, despite losing 8.6 per cent of its votes. However, while the other parties did not gain enough to win, this does not disguise the fact that the overall balance sheet is a defeat for the CDU-CSU.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Free Democrats (FDP), on the other hand, could scarcely conceal their triumph. In the AfD's nationwide euphoria, its chairman, Alexander Gauland, announced that his party would "hunt down Frau Merkel" and "reclaim our country and our people". It is perfectly clear what this means; not so much that our "own people" should be "reclaimed" but rather that those whom the AfD regard as not in that category should be expelled, or forcibly "Germanised".

Whilst the 94 AfD deputies will bring racism and nationalism into the Bundestag, the German federal parliament, the FDP wants to ensure there is a good antidote of "liberalism" within the next government, by which they mean privatisations, deregulation of labour protection and a neo-liberal agenda. For them, freedom is the freedom of the market and maximising profits for the big companies, if necessary at the expense of the environment and the people. This is witnessed in their demand to maintain coal mining or their lobbying for prestigious projects like a new inner-city airport in Berlin.

The victory of the FDP, a doubling of its percentage and number of votes, is also due to a "tactical" switch by a section of CDU/CSU voters.

The Greens showed that you can even manage to be happy with last place in the race for parliamentary seats, even if their celebrations were less enthusiastic. In the next government, they say they will stand for "environment", "openness" and "Europe". Europe means the "democratic" deepening of the EU in alliance with France for the benefit of "the European economy". In the environmental arena, it is all about "ecological conversion" within the framework of a Green New Deal with large-scale industry. And, by "openness", they mean the more humane organisation of migration and the "fair" selection of those allowed to come in.

All of this points to protracted, but ultimately successful, negotiations to form a "Jamaica coalition" government, so-called from the colours of that country's flag; black for the CDU-CSU; yellow for the FDP;

and green for the Green Party. The reason for this is simple: all three parties stand for a continuation of the Grand Coalition's policies on the key issues, or at best for secondary modifications to them. Above all, they all agree that resolving the crisis in the EU will be one of the central tasks of the next federal government. The aim is to strengthen the "core" of Europe, that is, the axis around France and Germany, and to make up lost ground in world politics vis-à-vis the USA and China. That will necessarily include preparedness for military interventions on a global scale, plus of course safeguarding the investment needs of big business.

SPD - the big losers

Only one party was unable to derive any satisfaction from election night. With 20.5 per cent, the SPD lost 5.2 per cent of the vote since 2012, the party's worst result since the Second World War. In absolute numbers, they lost almost two million voters.

Unlike the collapse of the CDU-CSU vote, the defeat of the SPD did not come as a big surprise, given the opinion polls published in the weeks before the election. But, whilst the CDU-CSU vote dropped from a strong result in 2013, when it gained 7.7 per cent, the SPD proved unable to recover from the losses it suffered then because of its responsibility for the Agenda 2010 policy of the early 2000s.

Obviously, the party leadership had already prepared for such a debacle. Immediately after the first results were announced, they stated they would not agree to any continuation of the Grand Coalition. At least in that respect they could surprise political opponents.

The only way they could avoid complete political suicide was to join the opposition, but it is questionable whether this will enable them to regenerate within it. The "tactic" of pretending that the CDU was responsible for the Coalition government policies and the absence of any of political debate in the country will certainly not be enough as a "strategy" for renewal.

The losses of the SPD are undoubtedly well-deserved and mainly due to their own political betrayals. In the age groups under 45, the party once again fell well below the average according to surveys; 19 per cent among 18-24 year-olds, 18 per cent among 25-35 year-olds and 16 per cent among 25-44 year-olds.

Amongst workers, it was 24 per cent, pensioners 24 per cent, and the unemployed, 23 percent, that is above-average, but at a historically low level. However, it is those sections of the population who were the more likely to stick to the SPD's agenda than salaried employees or even self-employed workers. There is a certain bitter irony in the fact that it was those whom the SPD has repeatedly betrayed who stayed most loyal to the party, not the much-courted "middle classes".

This is also reflected to some degree from the shifts in the pattern of voting. The SPD lost almost no one to the CDU-CSU, but 380,000 to the Greens and 470,000 to the FDP and these were more likely to be salaried employees and self-employed people. More alarming was the loss of 470,000 votes to the AfD, reflected in the high proportion of workers and unemployed amongst the latter's score. However, at the same time, 430,000 former SPD voters moved to the Left Party (DIE LINKE), especially in the former West Germany, where it scored well above average. In the former East Germany, the SPD slipped even further below the CDU, DIE LINKE and the AfD.

Undoubtedly, many of these were protest votes that were lost to these parties after it became clear that the SPD had no chance of heading a government anyway. People voted tactically against the Social Democrats, so to speak, but for motives that were quite contrary. The votes for the AfD certainly expressed dissatisfaction with all the other parties, but they were also a voice for a more open and unashamed racism and nationalism, as the polls on the motives of AfD voters clearly show.

The Left Party gained support for a quite different reason, basically, it signalled support for a "real" social

democratic policy, that is, for reforms in the interests of workers and youth.

The Left Party

If we only look at the Left Party's share of the vote, there seems to have been only a slight change, an increase of just 0.6 per cent to 9.2 per cent. However, this conceals enormous changes within its voting base.

Firstly, the party has consistently lost support in its traditional 'East German' bastions, where it slipped to third place behind the CDU and AfD. This represents a continuation of a trend that had already been evident in the state elections, particularly in Berlin. With regard to electoral swings, this is clearly expressed in losses to the AfD, around 400,000!

At the same time, party support has grown considerably in all western states as well as in Berlin. In Berlin, the losses in the east of the city were compensated for by increases in the west, so that the party was able to slightly increase its position compared to the federal elections in 2013. It also managed to get well above the 5 per cent threshold in all the 'Western' states, even in Bavaria, 6.2 per cent, Baden-Württemberg, 6.4 per cent, Rhineland-Palatinate, 6.8 per cent, and North Rhine-Westphalia, 7.5 per cent, where it had clearly failed in local state elections.

Certainly, some of these votes were also due to tactical voting by social democratic voters who voted for the Left Party because, without Left Party support in parliament, the SPD would have no chance of forming a government anyway and their votes would be 'wasted'.

The election result also shows changes in the social base of the party. Although it could attract slightly above average support from workers, 10 per cent, and the unemployed, 11 per cent, it now represents the more consciously left-reformist parts of the working class. In addition, it now has more support, 11 per cent, amongst 18-34 year olds than among any other age group.

There is no doubt that the relative stability of German imperialism, the lower level of trade union struggles and defeats suffered by the movement in support of refugees have diminished the opportunities of the Left Party. However, a shift in society to the right is itself accompanied by a strengthening of left reformist parties, especially when large parts of the working class are integrated in social partnership.

The Left Party, however, despite its modest successes, was not able to express any of the existing dissatisfaction. The reasons for this failure are also home-made, they are the result of political adaptation. Firstly, towards the racist and chauvinist agitation against refugees, which was also taken up by "leftists" such as Sarah Wagenknecht, deputy co-chair of the party, and, secondly, to the trade union leaderships and the "democratic" mainstream, as was evident in the condemnation of the protests after the G20 summit. Thirdly, in their own government policy in Thuringia, Berlin and Brandenburg. The fact that the party does not appear to many people to be "oppositional" is not a "presentational problem", but rather, albeit on a smaller scale at the SPD, a necessary consequence of the policies it implements in bourgeois governments and its acceptance of the parameters set by the federal government or reactionary laws.

Rise of the AfD

There is no doubt that the AfD has benefited from this, even more so, of course, from the SPD's policies. The Left Party and the SPD, the two parties historically and organically based on the working class, lost a total of 870,000 voters to the right-wing populists, almost as many as the CDU-CSU lost, 980,000.

In addition, the AfD was the only party that was able to mobilise former non-voters with 1.2 million votes. It became the leading party in Saxony with 27 per cent of the votes, just ahead of the CDU with 26.9 per

cent. There can be little doubt that this was because the AfD was the only party that presented itself as "anti-system" and was thus able to channel discontent of all kinds. The fact that opinion polls suggest that a majority of AfD voters voted for the party not because of its policies, but out of rejection of other parties, however, is no reason whatsoever to sound the all-clear.

Whatever people might say to pollsters, this "protest" clearly was connected to the content of the AfD's policies, its voters not only tolerated its open racism and aggressive German nationalism, but many voted precisely for this reason.

This was shown, for example, by surveys on the views of AfD voters on the evening of the election. According to 99 per cent of respondents, they think it is good that the AfD "wants to reduce the influence of Islam in Germany". In addition to these attitudes, the AfD was seen to be the best law and order party that really wants to fight crime, especially that committed by foreigners. In addition, their voters are eager to believe that we are "experiencing a loss of German culture", 95 per cent, and that "the influence of Islam in Germany is becoming too strong", 94 per cent.

Racism and, increasingly, racial nationalism, form the cement of the AfD. Alleged and real fears are thus connected to an aggressive chauvinistic, right-wing ideology, which today is still primarily parliamentary in nature, but which can also continue to radicalise, as the AfD's connections to openly fascist forces show.

Even though this party is still some distance away from the strength of the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, or the French National Front, FN, a right-wing populist, racist party has undoubtedly established itself in Germany with the third largest parliamentary group. Given the global political upheavals and intensified rivalry, this will hardly "disintegrate by itself", even despite the party's internal conflicts and the fact that it is still lacking an undisputed leadership. Its former leader, Frauke Petry, newly elected as an AfD MP, has said she will not sit with the AfD fraction and has left the party. There are rumours of a split in the North-Rhine Westphalian party and also some deputies might be supporting her.

It is even less likely that parliamentary life will automatically tame it. On the contrary. The policy of the next government will give substance to its claims to be a real opposition, especially if the SPD and the Left Party make the mistake of subordinating the struggle against the government to the need for an imaginary unity of all the "democratic" parties.

The AfD is not a foreign body in bourgeois society, rather, the emergence of a right-wing populist party illustrates the crisis-related processes that emerge from the lower depths of society, even before any serious economic worsening of the situation. Nationalism, chauvinism, preferential treatment of the Germans, sealing of borders, anti-Muslim racism, these are not unique selling points of the AfD, but are represented in all bourgeois parties and, in the form of social-chauvinism, also in SPD and left-wing parties. The AfD harvests the fruits that others have sown.

The mobilisation against the AfD and its racism must therefore not be seen as a separate task from the class struggle. Just as it is necessary to oppose the right-wing, racist agitation, this must be combined with the fight against state racism, for open borders and equal rights, but also with the "social issues", that is to say for a minimum living wage, pensions, equal access to education and against speculation in rents. It also requires a conscious fight against the poison of racism and nationalism in the ranks of the working class, in workplaces, universities and schools.

Government

A course independent of the next government, strengthening the left-wing both politically and in the trade unions, is an essential prerequisite not only for a successful fight against the AfD and the sentiments on

which it is based. The losses of the CDU but also the difficulties in quickly forming a Jamaica coalition, show that there is a second, more important, reason than the rise of the AfD, for ruling class disquiet.

After the Second World War, the spectrum of parties in West Germany had for a long time narrowed to effectively three parties. The emergence of the Left Party and the Greens had already undermined this but, with the rise of the AfD, yet another disruptive force has been added. However, as much as the CDU, CSU, Greens, FDP and the SPD are very similar on important issues, especially on European policy, their differences are also real and not just tactical. This applies not only to FDP and Greens, both of which would like to form a coalition with the CDU-CSU, but not with each other, but also within the CDU-CSU.

Immediately, there is no alternative to Merkel in terms of personnel. Above all, however, a clearer strategy is also needed if the EU is to be "united" and restructured under German leadership. In addition, the FDP and Greens in particular fear for their "unique selling points", but in view of their catastrophic election results, so does the Bavarian CSU, which faces upcoming state elections. The SPD's refusal to enter into negotiations with the CDU-CSU forces the three other parties to form a coalition. No wonder all of them are bad mouthing the SPD, since its decision seriously restricts their options.

While Merkel and the CDU-CSU politely ask the Social Democrats to reconsider their position, the FDP is doing so in much shriller tones. For example, their leader, Christian Lindner, accuses the SPD of treason because, for the first time since 1919, it is putting its party interests above those of the country. For the Social Democrats to signal willingness to form a coalition, in order to improve the FDP's hand in the Jamaica poker game, would be highly unlikely, even though the party has previously always been prepared to make such suicidal decisions in the "national", that is, the bourgeoisie's, interest.

But there is more to the excitement over the SPD's "hard" attitude. The bourgeoisie wants to keep the option of a "grand" coalition open for a second election in the event of internal disagreements between CDU/CSU, Greens and FDP. In the next few years, the ruling class does not want a scenario that would lead to more polarisation between the classes, to a "tougher" social democracy or even to a less government-oriented policy from the trade unions.

The rejection of the Grand Coalition, contrary to the intentions of all SPD leaders, is a warning of bigger confrontations over social and economic issues. If they want to regain "credibility" somehow, to claim to be the bringing "social justice" to the fore, then SPD must not only present themselves as an opposition to the government in the Bundestag, they must also face the competition of the Left Party, just as the Left Party must, conversely, take care that the SPD does not steal its thunder, that is, its social democratic programme.

Some conclusions

These brief observations lead to some initial conclusions.

1. The elections are a warning to the left and the workers' movement. They express a shift to the right in Germany. The victory of the AfD and its agitation is only the most extreme expression of this. The FDP's triumphant resurgence and the right-ward shift of the Green party also express this development.
2. Conditions have also become more unstable. We must reckon that the crisis of the European Union, the unpredictable turns of the world situation, but also the threat of a further growth of the AfD will be used as a means of enforcing discipline not only in the government, but also on the parliamentary opposition and the trade unions, by calling on them not to endanger the "unity of the democrats" against the racists by making "unrealistic demands".
3. Therefore, it is not only important to confront open racists on the street, in workplaces, in the city and in

the country this must be done through class politics, through an alliance of workers' organisations, migrants and refugees, trade unions and the left, not through joint declarations with the government.

4. The fight against the attacks of the next government, on the social, trade union and, above all, on the international level, must be at the centre of left-wing politics. The current situation requires and makes possible the coordination of resistance not only at national level, but above all also at European and international level. It is precisely the Left Party and the trade unions or, rather, the left-wing forces within them, that need to call for a decisive initiative which will allow unity with the struggles in France, the resistance in Catalonia, the fight against military interventions and closing the borders internationally. We on the left need to convene an action conference in Germany to discuss the new political situation and to decide on common mobilisations against the new government and the racists.

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