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German Elections

The Winner is the Left Party-PDS

- News from around the world -

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The elections to parliament in Germany had a remarkable outcome - almost all parties lost votes massively. The Liberal FDP (hardcore neoliberals) increased their vote by 2.4% and the Left Party-PDS doubled its vote to 8.7% and re-entered the federal parliament, after failing in the last elections in 2002.

Surprises

The big surprise is that none of the polls before the elections showed this outcome. All of them predicted a clear victory for the Christian Democrats. But the Social Democrats and Conservatives got almost the same result; the difference was less than 1%.

The Conservatives lost votes massively (principally to the Liberal Party), the Social Democrats lost even more (mainly to the Left Party-PDS), and the Green Party lost about 0.5%. The situation is now complicated, because neither the announced coalition between Liberals and Conservatives, nor the coalition between Social Democrats and Green Party in power for the last seven years, has a majority.

What happened?

According to the polls, for the first time in German election history a high percentage of the voters (up to 20%) had not decided whom to vote for until the last days before the elections.

The first reason for that is that the programmes of the parties, shown by their policies in recent years, are very similar - all of them announced further neoliberal reforms - the one more radical, the other less - and everybody knows that all of the important neoliberal measures (pension cuts, tax reform, health reform, lowering of unemployment benefits etc.) during the last years of the Schröder-Fischer government had been voted for by all of the parties.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/oskargregorgetfriendlyivp.jpg>] Gregor Gysi (left) with Oskar Lafontaine

There was de facto no opposition in the parliament (only from the Liberals, who asked for even harder measures). So the decision of the large number of undecided voters was influenced at least by the personnel (Schröder versus Merkel) and on this point Schröder was in a far better position.

Secondly, the Social Democrats managed to regain a big part of their traditional voters of the working class, especially in the industrial area of North-Rhine Westphalia, where they had suffered spectacular losses in the last regional elections.

The Christian Democrats made the mistake of announcing a very unpopular new tax reform and a rise in VAT during the election campaign and this made the difference: Most of the people were simply afraid of further cuts and believed in the lies that a Schröder government would avoid that.

Additionally the Christian Democrats lost a large number of votes to the Liberal Party, because the people who want even harder neoliberal politics changed to the Liberals to avoid a possible coalition between the two big parties.

In the end none of the two blocks got a majority. As usual everybody claimed to be the winner, although almost all of them lost votes.

At the moment the most probable option will be exactly this coalition between Christian and Social Democrats, because the Liberals announced firmly before the elections, that in no case would they join a government with the latter. There is still a theoretical possibility of a so-called "Jamaica coalition" (black/Christian Democrats, yellow/Liberals, green/Grünen), but more probable is a government formed by the two big parties - possibly with a chancellor, whose name will be neither Schröder nor Merkel.

What is happening at the moment and is noted in the newspapers is just theatre and raising the stakes for the necessary negotiations. At least the form of the coming coalition will not make a big difference. The general line of policies, as mentioned, is not that different between the four parties.

And the winner is...

But the real winner is the new Left Party, in reality not yet formed. Because of the German laws it was not possible that the WASG (Election Alternative for Work and Social Justice), a new party based mainly in western Germany and founded by former Social Democrats and Union leaders, and the PDS (successor to the former ruling party of East Germany) could form a joint list. A unification of the two parties in the short time before the elections was not possible.

So an agreement was made. The PDS changed its name to "Die Linke-PDS" (The Left-PDS) and opened its lists to candidates of the WASG. This tactic succeeded. Nationwide it got 8,7% (2002: 4%).

The majority of these votes came from the working class. According to a respectable analysis after the elections, 12% of the workers and 25% of the unemployed voted for the Left Party, which means, that about 1 million of its 4 million votes came from the unemployed.

There is still a big gap between the regions in former East Germany, where the Left had results between 23% and 27% and former West Germany, where the results are between 3.5 and 7.9% with a concentration in the big cities and industrial regions. Compared with the 2002 election results of the PDS in some regions this is a gain of some hundred percent.

Generally these votes are clear votes against neoliberalism - but not for socialism. The Left Party/PDS made a campaign focussed against the previously-mentioned neoliberal measures, against the participation of the German Army in the conflicts in Afghanistan and former Yugoslavia and for an alternative tax reform.

The former chairman and candidate for chancellor of the Social Democrats in 1990, Oskar Lafontaine, who joined the WASG and will sit in the new parliament, represents mainly neo-Keynesian ideas. However, his candidature is certainly one of the reasons for the success of the Left Party in western Germany.

Perspectives

First of all: for the first time since the 1950s we will have a real left opposition in the German parliament. At the

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moment there is no danger that the leading body of the PDS (which in some regions already governs in coalitions with the Social Democrats) will have the opportunity to participate in the federal government.

It is currently treated as a leper. Nobody talks to it. It is openly and unanimously qualified by the other parties as "non-democratic". But the presence of this force opens up a space for public discussion about the perspectives of society; a discussion that has been almost forgotten for the last twenty years.

In the first press conference the leaders of WASG and PDS announced that there will be a process of unification during the next 1-2 years. This process will be most important for the whole left in Germany. It will decide whether the new formation will be a simple revival of the "good old Social Democracy" (this apparently is the line of the right wing around Lafontaine, of the WASG. and Lothar Bisky and Gregor Gysi of the PDS) or if it will be a plural socialist party which is working for an alternative model of society and is engaging in the social struggles outside of parliament.

Such struggles will certainly take place in the next years because deregulation will go on. It will be the task of the radical left inside the new Left Party to link it to the social movements and also to fight, in this process of unification, for a programme which opens the door to a better future.