
West Germany

Economic depression decides Ruhr elections

by Rainer Apel

West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl faces big problems—his party, the Christian Democrats (CDU), is losing one election after the other, and the opposition Social Democrats (SPD) keep winning. Starting with the municipal elections in North Rhine-Westphalia last September, when the CDU lost several percentage points, the decline of the party's popularity has sped up. The March 10 state elections in Saarland toppled the CDU state government and brought radical SPD politician Oskar Lafontaine to power. On the same day, the CDU lost more than 5% in the municipal elections in Hesse.

On May 12, the voters of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) voted on a new parliament. These were important elections, since NRW has almost one-third of the national electorate of West Germany, and the state is also Germany's industrial heartland. Elections in this state always tell a lot about workers' political preferences, and industrial workers are the most powerful voter-bloc.

The CDU lost 6.7% in NRW, the SPD gained 3.7%, and the Free Democrats (FDP), which was not in the parliament during the last term, got back in with 6%. An estimated 550,000 CDU voters did not vote at all; some 190,000 voted for the SPD; and about 60,000 CDU voters cast their ballots for the FDP. Compared to the last state elections in 1980, the CDU lost 800,000 votes. Vis-à-vis the last national elections in March 1983, the losses were even higher—about 1.2 million votes. Kohl was shocked: "This is to be taken very seriously—this is a very heavy defeat for our party." How did it happen?

Kohl himself gave the answer on May 13, when the CDU national executive convened in Bonn to evaluate the election. He admitted that the votes were lost because of the "high unemployment, because of the uncertainty around the future of pensions, and because our campaign did not take up these issues." But Kohl himself is to blame: Two months before the elections, he keynoted the national party convention of the CDU in Essen—in the NRW's Ruhr region—and pronounced: "The fight against unemployment has never been important at the beginning of an economic recovery." The CDU worker-base was enraged. The Ruhr region, harboring most of Germany's heavy industry, coal mining, and metal processing, looks like the Pittsburgh area in the United

States—with industrial unemployment rates 5-10% over the national average, and total numbers of social-welfare recipients increasing way beyond the average rate in the rest of the country.

Not only did the CDU workers abstain from the campaign, they also stayed away from the vote on May 12. Compared to the elections of 1980, voter participation dropped by 5%. INFAS, a top opinion poll in Germany, commented, "There is a process of deepening demoralization among CDU voters about the bad economic policy performance of the Chancellor in Bonn. This puts Chancellor Kohl in a very dangerous position."

It puts him in a very dangerous position, indeed, since the Social Democrats are profiting from the effects the monetarist policies of Kohl's government. As long as Kohl subscribes to the "free market" doctrine which tells him that subsidies to steel, mining, and construction are no good, and that budget consolidation and austerity measures are what the nation needs, unemployment will go up. The main problem is not the few billion marks in subsidies, but that most West German industry runs at only 40 or 50% of its capacity. The Green Party and the radical ecologist movement have blocked 150-200 billion deutschemarks in industrial contracts, by blocking road and plant construction, nuclear power generation, and so on. Foreigners visiting the Ruhr are always struck by the fact that this most-industrialized region of Germany does not have a single nuclear power plant operating.

None of the big political parties has ever fought back against the ecologists, but all of them have subscribed to zero-growth and post-industrial doctrines. The Social Democrats have even adopted most of the ecologist demands as "theirs." But the Social Democrats, who retain the image of the traditional "workers party," have also been more clever in blaming the effects of the world depression on Chancellor Kohl's Christian Democrats.

This does indeed put the Chancellor "in a very dangerous position," since he and his party face national elections in February 1987. The minor coalition partner in Kohl's government, the FDP, is very unreliable, and it opposes any German participation in the SDI project. If Kohl wants to ensure German cooperation with the Americans in developing beam weapons, he has to be able to govern without the FDP, and must fight for the absolute majority in 1987.

The problem is, the FDP opposes any deviation from the austerity course, and threatens a walk-out from the coalition, which would leave Kohl with a minority government, or lead to his overthrow before the end of the current term. What shall Kohl do, therefore?

Adopting an economic policy favoring industrial investments and long-term state-to-state contracts with other nations to help industrial exports is one immediate requirement. The other is an aggressive political campaign against the Green Party. This will set free the 150 to 200 billion marks in blocked domestic industrial projects, and bring the labor vote to the CDU.