

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Voters reject ecology agenda

Closer contacts between Germany's two big parties may open the door to a "Grand Coalition" government.

The results of the March 13 elections for state parliament in Lower Saxony, the first of 19 campaigns in this super-election year, have a signal character for the political scene on a national level: the momentum toward a "Grand Coalition" between Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD), the two biggest parties, after the national elections on Oct. 16.

This prospect may not seem plausible, given that the CDU lost 5.6% of the voter strength it had four years ago in Lower Saxony, and that the SPD of incumbent Gov. Gerhard Schröder suffered no losses at all. But the election victory of Schröder's SPD in Lower Saxony nevertheless helped the CDU—not in that state, but rather on a national level. How so?

Germany now has more than 4 million officially reported jobless (the actual figure is over 7 million without regular employment), and at least another 450,000 new jobless are expected in the government's official projections for the end of this year. Combined with a great strategic crisis looming in the East that may be transformed into a major conflict between Russia and the West soon, parts of the German policymaking elites are preparing for a "grand consensus in the event of a big national crisis," to ensure that the country is not paralyzed by big labor strikes.

This is already happening. The much-awaited big labor walkouts in the engineering sector and in the public services sector (which contain about 50% of all organized labor un-

ionists) were suddenly called off in the first two weeks of March, in a surprising "spirit of agreement" between the two opposite sides of those wage negotiations.

Since the labor unions are mostly SPD-linked, their agreement to an early settling of the wage conflict means that the SPD was part of that understanding. And since the entrepreneurs' associations and a good part also of the state and the public administration are under the firm control of the CDU, it means that there was also a CDU side to the rapid agreement.

Another unusual phenomenon was in the Lower Saxony state elections: A considerable part of the CDU membership and constituency showed a preference toward the SPD's top candidate, Schröder, over their own top candidate, Christian Wulff. Stranger still, the national CDU leadership in Bonn never made any really serious effort to stop this erosion of support for Wulff. This lack of national-level action appears all the more absurd, given the kind of tactical and dirty maneuvers which the established parties' leaderships usually set into motion to secure control of their party machines—especially during election years.

The answer to this riddle is that Schröder's election victory on March 13 fit with the national moves of the CDU to improve relations with a specific current inside the SPD: Those Social Democrats who place pragmatism over ideology, who are willing to talk about concessions on questions of labor policies, state support of vital

high-technology areas, and essentials in foreign and defense policies.

Gerhard Schröder is one of those SPD pragmatists. He has been the most prominent Social Democrat to question the party's rejection of nuclear technology, and to propose a modification of the SPD's nuclear power policy to create "certain conditions" for the construction of one new power plant by the turn of this century.

Issuing permits for one single new power plant, at a time when 20 new ones are needed before the decade is out, is not what one would call a fundamental change of views; but even this was too much for the SPD leadership, and the Schröder initiative was voted down in the fall of 1993. For the CDU, on the other hand, Schröder's move was a clear signal that on certain aspects of industrial and technology policy, he offered himself as a partner for talks with the Christian Democrats.

Schröder's defeated opponent Wulff, on the other hand, belongs to a new "young generation" of CDU politicians who immersed in the ideology of radical environmentalism.

Schröder's election victory has now strengthened his position inside the SPD, and has provided the CDU with an option for "grand consensus" talks between the two big parties. Moreover, the fact that Oskar Lafontaine, the green-ecologist guru of SPD economic policies of the past 10-15 years, has recently been shunted more into the background by Schröder's pragmatist co-thinkers, will favor efforts for a "grand understanding" among SPD and CDU, which may in turn provide the launching pad for a full-fledged Grand Coalition in Bonn later this year. On the condition that radical-ecologist currents in both parties are kept under tight control by the pragmatists, the potential would then exist for a real program against the economic depression.