

Germany: Increased vote for the extreme right

State elections in Saxony-Anhalt

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Five months prior to federal elections to the Bundestag (the national parliament), the state election in Saxony-Anhalt has brought to light the sharp political and social tensions lying beneath the surface of German society. An extreme right-wing party, which conducts an openly racist witch hunt against foreigners, won nearly 13 percent of the vote, an event unprecedented since the banning of Hitler's Nazi Party after the Second World War.

The Deutsche Volksunion (DVU—German Peoples Union) is run by the Munich publisher and multi-millionaire Gerhard Frey. For decades he distributed books and magazines glorifying the Nazi regime. Before the election the DVU had only a few dozen members in Saxony-Anhalt, located in the former East Germany. Frey invested millions in a large-scale propaganda offensive and was able to turn to his own advantage the pent-up anger and desperation felt by many of the victims of the worsening social crisis.

Lying on the rivers Elbe and Saale, and with two million voters, Saxony-Anhalt was once the second biggest industrial area in Germany, surpassed only by the Ruhr. The engineering and chemical industries had deep roots in the region. The first colour film in history was produced in the town of Wolfen. In the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), some 120,000 were employed in the chemical industry, in the triangle between the cities of Bitterfeld, Halle and Leuna. The area surrounding Magdeburg was the stronghold of the East German engineering industry, employing over 80,000. In the region around Mansfeld the copper industry predominated.

Today unemployment in Saxony-Anhalt is the highest in all Germany. According to official figures, 24.8 percent are without work. If one includes a further 100,000 who are covered by various work-creation schemes, retraining programs and adult education, the total without a proper job comes to nearly a third of the population. The vast majority of youth have not the slightest chance of obtaining work once they finish school or apprenticeship.

The voters in Saxony-Anhalt held the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Chancellor Helmut Kohl primarily responsible for these conditions. In 1990, the year of German reunification, the CDU was the biggest party in the state, winning a majority for its party lists in 48 out of 49 constituencies. Four years later their vote collapsed and the CDU was forced to hand over the reins of state government. Now it has lost an additional third of its vote. With 22 percent of the vote, the party lies only slightly ahead of the ex-Stalinists in the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS—Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor to the ruling party of the former East Germany).

Four years ago opposition to the Kohl government was expressed in a high abstention rate and increased votes for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and PDS. Only 55 percent turned out to vote, the worst figure in

any state election since the war.

This time around, electoral participation was significantly higher, at 71 percent. However, the SPD was able to benefit far less than many had expected. With a 36 percent share of the vote, the social democrats only gained an additional 2 percent. It picked up approximately the same percentage of votes as was lost by the Greens, with whom the SPD had previously formed the state government. The Greens slipped below the five percent "hurdle" which, under German electoral law, means they are no longer entitled to be represented in the state parliament. At the same time, the ex-Stalinist PDS was only just able to maintain its existing share of the vote.

Thus the protest vote overwhelmingly benefited the ultra-right-wing DVU. The party centred its campaign on social questions and changed its election programme to express this. Its well-known racist propaganda against foreigners was linked to the "fight against mass unemployment." The party's central election slogans were "German money for German jobs" and "Jobs for Germans first." These slogans could be read on 20,000 gigantic election posters for weeks on end. Air planes towing DVU banners flew over the cities and towns.

A week before the election the DVU added a new slogan: "This time, make your vote a protest!" In their election propaganda "corrupt politicians," "greedy parliamentarians" and "European Union big-wigs" were denounced in the same breath as "asylum fraudsters." Another line advanced by the DVU was: "If the bosses are not prepared to invest, then the state must provide money to create jobs."

The DVU whipped up and exploited the broad opposition to Kohl. He was, they said, "the main culprit for the galloping collapse of our economy." DVU spokesman Bernhard Dröse declared, "The traditional right wing has neglected the social question for too long."

This extremist right-wing party was methodically chasing votes. Spending over 3 million Deutsch marks, the party invested more money in its campaign than the SPD and CDU put together. They sent personal letters to all 18 to 29-year-olds in the state.

As a result, 30 percent of those under the age of thirty voted for the DVU. Nearly three-quarters of DVU votes (103, 000) came from former non-voters or first-time voters. Compared to the elections four years ago, 40,000 former CDU and SPD voters, and 11,000 former PDS voters, cast their ballot for the DVU. Indeed, 23 percent of DVU voters split their vote between the DVU and the PDS, voting for the candidates of the PDS with their first vote and for the DVU party list with their second. In working class towns and areas of social tension the radical right was able to record its biggest successes: Bitterfeld, 17.5 percent; Wolfen, 17.4 percent; Saalkreis and Halle-Silberhöhe, 17 percent.

Most young voters were between ten and twenty years old at the time of the collapse of the GDR [East Germany] and German reunification. They

have grown up in a society in an advanced stage of economic and political decay.

They experienced how their teachers first celebrated the corrupt East German regime as “socialist,” and how many of the same people, following reunification, became the most enthusiastic supporters of capitalism and the market economy. These turncoats evoked disgust and cynicism. Western-style democracy soon revealed itself to mean mass unemployment and social misery for the mass of the population, and unparalleled riches for a small economic and political elite. Many of these youth are fed up with empty consolations and prattle about reforms, and are seeking a radical alternative to the social crisis.

The extreme right gained far less among older and more politically experienced voters. Only 9 percent of those between the ages of 45 and 59 voted DVU, and just 3 percent of those over 60.

The political responsibility of the SPD and PDS

The SPD and PDS bear the main political responsibility for the fact that an extreme right-wing and fascist party was able to benefit from the social protest. They have relinquished the social question to the right-wing demagogues. Opinion polls estimate that the DVU could register similar successes in other states.

It is noteworthy that they were able to achieve their first electoral breakthrough in Saxony-Anhalt. It was, up to now, the only state in Germany governed by an SPD-Green minority government officially supported by the PDS.

This so-called “Magdeburg Model” rapidly disenchanted those who had hoped to see policies implemented in the interests of the working class. The government of social democrat Dr. Reinhard Höppner merely continued the policies of the previous CDU office-holders, who had decimated local industry and unscrupulously enriched themselves along the way.

One of the first actions of the new government in 1994 was to appoint Klaus Schucht as economics minister. Schucht has considerable experience in destroying jobs. As chairman of the Ruhrkohle AG, and then as the privatisation expert for the *Treuhand* charged with selling off the former East German state’s assets, he participated in closing down the coal industry in the Ruhr and in systematically dismantling the economy of the [East German] GDR. Under his supervision the interests of big business were ruthlessly imposed without regard for the social consequences.

As a result, the number of unemployed rose dramatically during the years of the “Magdeburg Model.” In towns like Bitterfeld, a former centre of the chemical industry, unemployment has doubled since 1996, to the present total of 28.4 percent. Höppner’s government has passed no fewer than four austerity programmes with drastic cuts in all areas of social benefits. Under his leadership the number of those dependent on social welfare has risen by 20 percent. Despite this, it was decided to slash social security payments by 147 million marks at the beginning of this year. In the labour market sector 58 million marks are to be axed. And the number of homeless has risen from year to year, already reaching 15,000 by the end of 1996.

This course of action has been supported by the trade unions. At the beginning of last year the Magdeburg Ministry of Culture concluded a special type of wages settlement with the teachers union. In exchange for limited employment protection, a 19 percent cut in teachers’ wages was agreed. An example of the truly pioneering work being carried out by the social democrats!

For its part, the PDS has supported all of these cuts and austerity

programmes and given them its parliamentary blessing. It bears direct responsibility for the social and political misery which has been exploited by the DVU.

Developments similar to those in Saxony-Anhalt can be seen throughout Europe. In those states and countries where the social democrats have taken over government, they have established themselves as even more determined representatives of big business than their conservative predecessors. Accompanying the growing social crisis and the impoverishment of ever-broader social layers, the general population is gripped by a sense of political helplessness. No one seems to trouble himself with their problems and needs.

So the basis is laid for fascist demagogues to exploit the desperation of these layers and direct social opposition into racist channels. In this way the neo-Fascist *Front National* of Le Pen increased its influence in the recent French local elections, and in Austria the neo-fascist Jörg Haider’s share of the vote has risen from 5 percent to 27 percent under a social democratic government.

A political swing to the right

All of the political parties in Germany have reacted to the electoral success of the DVU by making a further swing to the right.

The Christian Social Union (CSU—the Bavarian sister party of the CDU) is openly adopting the racist slogans of the DVU to capture votes. Chancellor Kohl has ordered his Interior Minister, Manfred Kanther, to undertake measures tightening up domestic security and to prepare a law-and-order campaign for the federal elections in the autumn. The SPD candidate for Federal Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, has demanded that the SPD in Saxony-Anhalt form a “grand coalition” with the CDU, the very party which just lost the election.

In Saxony-Anhalt itself the majority of the SPD favour continuing the “Magdeburg Model,” i.e., a minority SPD government supported by the PDS. The PDS has already agreed to give such support without any preconditions. A section of the trade union bureaucracy and numerous ostensibly “left” radical groups have praised such an alternative as being in the interests of the working class.

In reality, there would be nothing progressive in such a political constellation. Prime Minister Höppner prefers the PDS to the CDU because he has more confidence that the PDS can deal with the social upheavals which the election result heralds. Not only is the PDS far more adept at social demagoguery, it possess—unlike any of the other parties—an extensive party apparatus in East Germany.

The most important lesson arising from the election in Saxony-Anhalt is that the working class must intervene in political events as an independent social force. To this end it requires an international socialist strategy and a party which is capable of reorganising economic life according to the needs of the population—not the profit interests of the big companies and banks. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) is taking part in the forthcoming federal elections precisely to build such a party.



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