State elections in Hesse

German political establishment shifts to the right

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The elections in the German state of Hesse on February 7th were the first since the formation of a Social Democratic-Green coalition on the national level in autumn of last year. In the national elections of September 1998, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens ousted the conservative Christian Democratic government under Helmut Kohl, which had been in power for the previous sixteen years.

Now, only a few months later, the SPD-Green coalition which had ruled Hesse for the past eight years has been defeated by the combined vote of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) under Roland Koch and the small Free Democratic Party (FDP). The CDU and FDP will form the new state government.

The heavily industrialised state of Hesse is located in the middle of what was formerly West Germany and has a population of 6 million, including many immigrants. The city of Frankfurt, while not the state capital, is Hesse's most important city. A major banking centre, it is the home of the European Central Bank, which is charged with overseeing the new single European currency, the euro.

The old government in Hesse lost its majority due to heavy losses suffered by the Greens. This is particularly significant, because Hesse is the cradle of the Green movement, where the first-ever Red-Green coalition was formed in 1985. After a brief interruption, the SPD and the Greens had formed the government for the past eight years. In the February 7 elections, the Greens lost a full third of their votes, falling from 11.2 to 7.1 percent. The SPD vote improved slightly to 39.6 percent, but this could not make up for the losses of the Greens.

On the other hand, the CDU vote rose by almost 4 percent to 43.1 percent. The CDU campaigned on an openly racist platform. In face of heavy opposition within the CDU itself, their candidate for state premier initiated a campaign against the introduction of a new citizenship law by the federal government. Under certain conditions, the new law would enable immigrants to acquire a German passport without giving up their original nationality. It would also guarantee children born in Germany the right to citizenship.

The CDU initiated a campaign against this projected legislation by collecting signatures on the streets, thereby encouraging a veritable lynch mob atmosphere. This xenophobic campaign was a clear breach of what had previously been a taboo in official German politics, given the horrific history of Nazi racism. Almost on a daily basis, police intervened to protect CDU activists from angry passers-by and spontaneous protests, while the SPD and the Greens remained all but silent on the issue.

The following comment on the election has been translated from the German section of the World Socialist Web Site.

Major losses for the Greens and an openly racist campaign by the Christian Democrats (CDU) decided the outcome of the state elections in Hesse on February 7.

This was the first election to a state parliament since the change of government in Bonn last September. It has brought to the fore the more fundamental problems that were obscured by the triumphant election victory of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens at the federal level.

The utter collapse of the Greens in the Hesse election and the mobilisation of the most backward layers by the CDU signature campaign are the first outward signs of the rifts opening up in the old party and parliamentary system. The old political order is beginning to crack under the pressure of social tensions.

The SPD's victory in the federal elections last September could be traced back to pent up dissatisfaction resulting from permanently high unemployment and ongoing social cuts. However, the supposedly democratic way out of this impasse--a change of government--has turned out to be a sham solution. The real programme of Chancellor Schröder is directly counterposed to the needs of the people. His models are Holland, Britain and the USA, where state-enforced cheap labour and drastic cuts in wages and social benefits are the norm.

The entry of the Greens into the federal government served not only to secure a majority, but also to lend this right-wing agenda a progressive appearance. However, after just three months in office, the Greens have succeeded in completely discrediting themselves. On all the essential questions they have been brought to their knees without even a murmur.

This was seen most clearly in their agreement last October to send the Bundeswehr (armed forces) into Kosovo. It was also the case when, despite a coalition agreement promising an end to the reprocessing of nuclear waste, Schröder peremptorily dropped it and agreed to the wishes of the energy companies.

It is obvious that the Greens' loss of votes can be traced back to their role in Bonn. Even up to late January, opinion polls forecast a

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clear Red-Green (SPD-Greens) majority for Hesse. This is of course not to suggest that the many years of right-wing policies carried out by Green ministers in Hesse, such as their brutal deportations policy, has not also played a role.

The experience as a government party at the federal level, however, has unmistakably shown Green voters and the whole population that their "social and ecological alternative" buckles miserably whenever a representative of the financial and political elite merely furrows his brow. Faced with the deep gulf in society between rich and poor, they fear a mobilisation of the masses from below and throw themselves into the arms of state power. Their positions and their incomes lie far closer to their hearts than the faded ideals of their youthful rebellion.

The CDU, whose contradictory internal tendencies have become ever clearer following the loss of power, are reacting to the same social polarisation. Roland Koch, CDU chairman in Hesse and future state premier, stands on the far right of this so-called "peoples party", which has up to now united the most varied strata and interests.

In response to the social crisis, this wing of the party is seeking to mobilise the racist dregs of society. This was clearly the content of their campaign against dual nationality, which Koch began in Hesse against considerable opposition even from within the CDU itself. Their motto "Yes to integration. No to dual nationality" was obvious hypocrisy.

But for the time being, Koch's strategy has been successful. It enabled the CDU to pull the dissatisfaction of the most desperate layers behind it.

In return for a short-term election victory, the CDU has reawakened the spirit of minority oppression and pogroms on the streets as part of official political life. The chairman of the federal advisory council on foreign immigrants, Murat Cakir, said quite correctly that he now feared "a wild fire, such as had never been seen before". He warned in a radio interview that "similar attacks like Solingen and Mölln" (where Turkish families were burned to death) would occur if the CDU continued its campaign against foreigners.

The director of the asylum and refugee organisation Pro Asyl, Günter Burkhard, noted, "It is a serious error that the SPD and the Greens did not mount an offensive against this challenge... Ducking the issue did not pay off."

In the past, despite implementing anti-foreigner laws, all the parties in parliament publicly condemned racist attacks. Now it seems that the refined "democratic consensus" can no longer be taken for granted. Official politics is leaving its traditional salons and placing one foot in the gutter. Barely a four-percent increase in the CDU vote turns out to be sufficient temptation to shake the much-vaunted democratic foundations of the establishment parties.

Dieter Wiefelspütz, SPD speaker on domestic affairs, immediately declared that the Hesse elections had been a "referendum against dual nationality". He said that it was now time to "bid farewell to a general acceptance of dual nationality". Party chairman and Minister of Finance Oskar Lafontaine also announced immediate "consequences for the reform of citizenship law". For the time beeing SPD Minister of the Interior Otto Schily is holding on to his draft legislation on dual nationality.

The Greens' spokesman on immigrant affairs, Cem Özdemir, said that although the Greens continued to support easier dual citizenship, they should "make clear that dual nationality is not the aim".

CDU politician Heiner Geissler, who had strongly criticised the signature campaign, also backed down. He said he had feared that the campaign might strengthen the extreme right-wing parties, but this had not happened.

Ruth Wagner, chair of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Hesse, toned down her earlier criticisms, saying voters had "not recognised that the FDP rejected dual citizenship", they had "misinterpreted its criticism of the CDU's signature action".

Party spokesmen in Bonn and the mass media have generally interpreted the Hesse elections as confirmation that "the people" reject dual nationality and are susceptible to racist slogans.

The facts and figures refute this interpretation. The Elections Research Group drew the conclusion that the change of government in Hesse "came about less through any massive change of opinions in the population as a whole than through the very unequal mobilisation of party supporters". Disappointed former SPD and Green voters behaved more passively, whereas the CDU was able to mobilise new layers.

There is broad opposition in the population to racism and xenophobia. This was shown by the confrontations that occurred at the campaign tables of the CDU, where its supporters sought to collect signatures. It was also demonstrated in the success of the counter-campaign mounted by the daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which collected some 80,000 signatures in a very short time. However, this political opposition has not yet found its own political representation and therefore lacks power. The experience with the Greens shows it would be a dangerous mistake to expect this party of windbags to defend democratic rights.

The failure of the Greens, so clearly reflected in the Hesse elections, has social roots. In the final analysis, the Greens rest on the same privileged layers as the SPD, CDU and FDP.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, German section of the Fourth International, is seeking to construct an opposition based on working people which will defend their interests. Only a socialist programme that represents the interests of the majority can prevent the division of the population along national lines.

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