

Social democrats suffer record losses in European elections

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The results of the European Union elections, which concluded in the 15 member states last Sunday, revealed the deep gulf between the mass of working people and their official political representatives.

Turnout has never been so low since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. In Germany and France, less than half the electorate went to the polls—in Britain it was less than 25 percent, a record for any nationally-contested election.

Press and media commentators have ascribed this to a “lack of interest in Europe”. It is true that the European Parliament enjoys little public recognition and its political influence stands in inverse relation to the lucrative salaries and privileges of its deputies. Nevertheless, the general antipathy towards the corrupt institutions of the EU only provides a very conditional explanation of the election result. To a far greater extent, it is a rejection of the policies of the social democratic governments running Europe.

The social democratic parties, presently governing in 13 of the EU's 15 member states either alone or in coalition, will only occupy 180 seats in the 626-seat European Parliament. In the last legislative period they could boast 214 deputies, forming the largest single political bloc. The most spectacular social democratic losses were in Britain and Germany.

Just nine months after their victory in the federal elections, when they entered government after 16 years in opposition, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffered a debacle. They lost around 10 percent, achieving just a 31 percent share of the votes cast. In absolute figures, their result looks even more disastrous. Last autumn, over 20 million voters cast their ballot for the SPD. On Sunday, it was only 8.3 million. The SPD's coalition partners, the Greens, were just able to maintain their percentage share at 6.4 percent. But they also lost 700,000 votes. In the last European elections in 1994 they managed just over 10 percent.

The big winners were the Christian Democrats of the CDU and CSU who together achieved a 49 percent share and won the majority of German seats. CDU party leader Wolfgang Schäuble said the result was a confirmation of conservative politics and a challenge to the government to adopt a clear right-wing course, a demand enthusiastically supported in the media.

Quite different conclusions can be drawn if the result is regarded more closely. Despite their election success, the conservatives were unable to win any new voters. They received some 6 million votes (one third) less than in the previous federal elections. Clearly the Christian Democrats did not win over any votes from the SPD; their result was achieved exclusively thanks to numerous SPD voters abstaining.

The reason for this is also plain to see. There is a broad opposition to

German participation in the Kosovo war that finds an expression even inside the ranks of the SPD and the Greens. The rightward turn that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder implemented in finance and social policy following the spectacular departure of Economics Minister Oskar Lafontaine earlier this year has been met with increasing rejection. In the European election this was only able to express itself through abstentions. Most SPD voters reject support for the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, successors to the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany), the only party in the German parliament to oppose the war. Nevertheless, the PDS was able to pass the 5 percent hurdle and gain representation in the European Parliament for the first time.

In contrast, the liberal FDP only managed to win 3 percent of the vote. The party, which was a coalition partner in every German government from 1969 to 1998 and whose leader sat in Cabinet as the Foreign Minister, was reduced to the level of a splinter group. The FDP is the only German party to unashamedly defend a neo-liberal economic programme, which, with some justification, they accuse Schröder of having stolen. Their election result shows how unpopular such a programme is.

This was still not sufficient to prevent Schröder announcing a further rightward turn in response to the election. He said he would now act just as consistently in domestic politics as in foreign affairs. This can only be taken as a threat: the war against Yugoslavia is now to be followed by a war against the working class.

Turnout was just 23 percent, some 10 points below the previous low in the European election of 1984. Two years after its landslide victory, the Labour Party has ceded precedence to the Conservatives once again. Labour's share sank from 44 to 28 percent, and it won just 29 seats in the European Parliament. In the 1994 elections Labour won 62 seats, forming the biggest national contingent in the Social Democratic bloc, the “Party of European Socialists”.

The Tories doubled their representation to 36. The Liberal Democrats won 10 seats (up from 2), the UK Independence Party, which calls for Britain to leave the EU altogether, 3 (0), the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru 2 (0), the Scottish National Party 2 (2) and the Greens 2 (0).

The Conservatives benefited from the introduction of proportional representation for the first time. But, as in Germany, they were also able to profit from the massive Labour abstention. In Conservative strongholds turnout was generally some 10 percent higher compared to Labour's heartlands in the North. For the first time in 10 years the Tories won European seats in Scotland. This follows their debacle in the 1997 general election, when not a single Conservative MP was returned to Westminster from Scotland.

The rejection of New Labour was not just seen in the European election. In a by-election held at the same time in Leeds following the death of Foreign Office minister Derek Fatchett, less than 20 percent bothered to vote. This was the lowest turnout in Britain since World War Two. Labour candidate Hillary Benn, the Blairite son of veteran left winger Tony Benn, saw the Labour majority slump from over 20,000 to just above 2,000.

New Labour's European election campaign was centred on Tony Blair's reputation as Prime Minister and party leader. It hoped to be able to profit from a "Kosovo factor" in the same way that Margaret Thatcher did following the Malvinas (Falklands) war in 1983. That the opposite occurred, confirms how little popular support existed for the war against Yugoslavia, despite the absence of coherent political opposition to it.

The Socialist Party of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, whose lists also included two other small parties, won just 22 percent. Turnout was 47 percent, a record low in France for any European election.

Jospin's coalition partner, the Communist Party of Robert Hué, repeated its 1994 result of just 7 percent. This was almost overtaken by the joint list of Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), which describe themselves as Trotskyists. For the first time in a European election they passed the 5 percent hurdle, gaining 5 seats.

The real election winners in France were the Greens. With former student radical Daniel Cohn-Bendit as their lead candidate, they surpassed the Communist Party, winning 10 percent. Cohn-Bendit has long been active in Green politics in Germany, where he held office in the Frankfurt city administration. The German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, is regarded as one of his closest associates. Cohn-Bendit ran the election campaign as a combination of media show and political provocation. A strident supporter of the war against Yugoslavia, he called repeatedly for ground troops to be employed.

The biggest loser was President Jacques Chirac. His Gaullist Party only managed to win 13 percent, pushed into third place behind an anti-European split-off headed by former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua and arch right-winger Philippe de Villiers. The Gaullists' traditional coalition partners in the UDF (*Union pour la démocratie française* - Union for French Democracy) ran their own list this time, gaining 9 percent.

The fascist *Front National*, which split into two competing factions in the past year, also lost votes. The wing headed by Jean-Marie Le Pen, which retains the *Front National* name, was able to scrape a 6 percent vote and will re-enter the European Parliament. The *Mouvement National* of his rival Bruno Mégret failed to win any seats, receiving just 4 percent. In 1994, the *Front National* won almost 11 percent.

The state of turmoil on the French right was further witnessed by the fact that the movement *Chasse, pêche, nature, traditions* (CPNT - Hunting, fishing, nature, traditions) surprisingly managed the same result as the Communist Party and will enter the European Parliament.

As in France, both the government and opposition camps are divided and fractious. Turnout was a relatively high 80 percent. Compared to the 1994 European elections, all the bigger parties had to cede votes to their smaller rivals, who represent less of a fundamental opposition to them than the attempt to create new camps and blocs through various political combinations.

The largest Italian faction in the new European Parliament is *Forza Italia*, headed by media baron Silvio Berlusconi, which received a 25 percent share. This represents a 5 percent decline since the last

election. Berlusconi's former government coalition partners, the fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* and the separatist *Lega Nord*, both lost 2 percent, gaining a share of 10 and 5 percent respectively.

The Democratic Socialists of Prime Minister Massimo d'Alema continued to lose votes, gaining 18 percent, down one point. The largest losses were suffered by the Christian Democratic Peoples Party, which fell from 10 to 4 percent. In its place, the list headed by EU Commissioner Emma Bonino rose from 2 to 10 percent. The Liberal Democrats' list of EU Commission President-designate Romano Prodi won 8 percent. Prodi formed the Democrats to try to rob the Democratic Socialists of their primary place in the government coalition. Together with the Bonino list and the Popular Party he almost equalled them.

The former Stalinists who split over the question of government participation were able to slightly increase their vote. Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), that is outside the government, won 4.3 percent. The Party of Italian Communists, which is in the government coalition, gained 2 percent. Together they now have 6 seats in the European Parliament, compared to 5 last time.

If the results in the 15 EU member states are taken as a whole, no common picture arises. In some countries, the question "for or against the EU" strongly polarised the election - as in Britain and among the French right. In Denmark, EU opponents won 4 out of 16 seats in a surprise result. In other countries, the election was dominated by mainly national questions.

In Belgium, a general election was held in parallel to the European poll. The governing coalition of Social and Christian Democrats lost heavily. Winners were the Liberals, and the Flemish fascists of the *Vlaams Blok*.

In the Netherlands, the governing Social Democrats and Liberals lost votes, as did the opposition Christian Democrats. On the left wing, the *GroenLinks* (Green-Left), which was formed out of the former Communist Party, and the Maoist Socialist Party both won strong support. *GroenLinks* increased their vote from 4 to 12 percent, and the Socialist Party to 5 percent. Together, they won 5 seats, just one less than the Labour Party of Prime Minister Wim Kok.

In Spain, the governing Peoples Party remains the single strongest faction. The opposition social democratic PSOE almost equalled them, at the expense of the "United Left", formed out of the Communist Party. Its vote sank from 14 to 6 percent, reducing its seats from 9 to 5.

In Austria, the governing coalition of Social and Christian Democrats made small gains, increasing their seats by one. The extreme right Austrian Freedom Party of Jörg Haider lost one seat, falling into third place behind the government parties.

As a whole, the situation in Europe is marked by instability. The roots for this lie in the growing alienation from the political establishment among the mass of the working people. The introduction of the euro in January 1999, and the financial and political consequences of the war in Kosovo will sharpen these social tensions.



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