

The European Union elections and the German far-right

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Seldom have the pollsters tried so hard to turn an election result on its head, as in the aftermath of the German elections for the European Parliament. Seldom has this task proved so difficult, which is not hard to understand since the results were so unequivocal.

In the elections, held two weeks ago, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffered a debacle, capturing a mere 31 percent of the votes cast, a drop of 10 percent compared to the party's vote in the German federal elections last autumn. The SPD's coalition partners, the Greens, were just able to maintain their share of the vote at 6.4 percent. Less than half of the electorate went to the polls, the lowest turnout since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979.

The “big victory” of the Christian Democrats—they registered an 11 percent nation-wide gain, as compared to the federal elections, in their share of the votes cast—was actually based on a loss of 3.4 million votes in absolute terms. Such a result cannot be interpreted as heralding a “quick march by the Christian Democrats back to power”, as even the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted.

All of the parties in Bonn maintain that the war in Yugoslavia played no role in the election. Nothing could be further from the truth. At the very least, it showed a remarkable lack of enthusiasm for the war among broad layers of the population.

Germany's first offensive military action since the Second World War has upset political conditions. Almost uncritical support for the bombing of Yugoslavia ran straight through the political establishment, marking an historical turning point in German foreign policy.

The reawakening of German militarism will increasingly come to set the direction for domestic policy as well. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's

words—that German domestic policy must attain the same level of excellence as German foreign policy—could hardly be more threatening.

What should working people expect? A further political turn to the right. Schröder can be expected to propose a “tax and budget cuts concept” and warn of “difficult times” ahead.

The massive loss of votes by the Social Democrats expresses not only “disappointment with the ‘New Middle’”, (The German equivalent of Tony Blair's “Third Way”), or frustration over the record of the “Red-Green” government coalition. Broad layers of working people who put an end to the Kohl era last autumn by voting for the SPD have now turned their backs on all the parties in Bonn.

The experience of the last nine months has provided proof positive that the SPD and the Greens have moved rapidly to the right. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, the establishment parties have received support from less than half the electorate. From its share of the poll in the European election, the governing SPD only represents 13.7 percent of all eligible voters.

The fact that in Germany the growing alienation of the mass of working people from the political establishment did not express itself in increased votes for the extreme right is another important aspect of the elections. The far right, like the bigger parties in Bonn, received a cold shoulder. In contrast to the bourgeois parties like the SPD, Greens, Christian Democrats and Liberals, there has been no turn to the right in the general population.

The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) received 107,500 votes (0.4 percent). Compared with their result in the federal elections, they lost 20,000 votes. However, in comparison with their result in the

1994 European elections, they gained 30,000 votes—making them the only party to increase their vote in absolute terms.

The German Peoples Union (DVU), which has in the past garnered a relatively high percentage of the protest vote, did not participate in the European elections. They did, however, stand candidates in the local elections, which were being held in six states, but did not register exceptional results. In Saxony Anhalt, where they captured over 12 percent of the vote in the last state elections, they only managed 0.4 percent.

The clearest losses could be seen in the vote for the *Republikaner* (Republicans), the largest party of the far right. They received just 1.7 percent, a smaller share than in the federal elections last September. Compared with the last European elections, they have lost more than half their 3.9 percent share of the vote. At that time some 1.3 million voters supported them; in this election their vote fell to 460,000. Like last time, they will not be represented in the European Parliament. In the 1989 European elections, the *Republikaner* won a 7.1 percent share, which was sufficient to give them six deputies. Together with the French and Belgian far-right parties, *Front National* and *Vlaams Blok*, they were able to form a “technical faction” in the European Parliament.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude that the election results mean the German far-right have become an insignificant factor. Such a superficial approach underestimates the significance of these extreme right-wing tendencies.

The *Republikaner* were formed in 1983 as a right-wing split-off from the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU—election partners of the Christian Democratic Union). Their initial electoral success brought them seats in many local councils, the state legislature of Baden-Württemberg, and, in 1989, the European Parliament. With such institutional successes, they sought to distance themselves from their thuggish past and were able to attract conservative layers of voters. In the Baden-Württemberg state elections of 1992 they recorded their best results in the well-off belt around the city of Stuttgart. This state also boasts the highest per capita income of all Germany.

An increasingly fascist tendency has now concentrated itself inside the NPD. While they like to present themselves as right-wing intellectuals, the

National Democrats deliberately recruit militant youth and skinheads from the hot-spots of former East Germany. The NPD have authoritatively participated in providing a theoretical orientation to the far-right, using the *Junge Freiheit* (Young Freedom) newspaper.

The more the establishment parties have adopted the policies of the extreme right, the more the independent basis for such parties has disappeared. Their loss of votes in the European elections shows that Germany's far-right tendencies are returning to the bosom of the mainstream parties.

This development can most clearly be seen in Bavaria. The CSU is credited with having achieved a “powerful victory,” its share of the votes cast having risen from 48.9 percent in 1994 to 64 percent today, a jump of 15.1 percent. In actual votes, however, this translates into an increase of only 140,000. A total of 2.5 million voted for the CSU.

In comparison, the *Republikaner* lost 250,000 votes (a decline of 75 percent). The right-wing policies of the CSU and their Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber have simply made the *Republikaner* superfluous. If such tendencies are now starting to become active inside the establishment parties, it is because the latter are increasingly amenable to nationalist and racist politics.



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