

# 250,000 demonstrate in Vienna against new Austrian government

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On February 19 some 250,000 people rallied in Vienna's Heldenplatz square to demonstrate against the new Austrian government formed by the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) together with the ultra-rightwing Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The demonstration was held under the slogan "Resistance against Black-Blue [the two parties' colors], Against Racism and Welfare Cuts". It was the biggest demonstration in Austria since the formation of the Second Republic after World War II and the culmination of numerous protests and demonstrations since the FPÖ's election success last October. Other protests involving thousands were held throughout Europe and in the USA.

The demonstrators came from Vienna, all of Austria and many parts of Europe and from all strata of society, with young people, school and university students most in evidence. Entire families came to the central Heldenplatz square after marches converged from various points in the city—Stefansdom cathedral, the University, the House of Parliament and the State Opera.

The day before, 11,000 school students from 60 different schools in Vienna resisted intimidation by authorities and demonstrated against the new government under the slogan "Resist Racism and Welfare Cuts".

The rally on February 19 expressed the sharpening divisions in Austrian society. Many people are deeply disturbed at the prospect of fascists and their right-wing politics becoming "socially acceptable"—with all that implies for democratic rights and liberties. The basic mood was one of opposition to the right-wing agenda of the new government including its plans for drastic social welfare and job cuts, and compulsory work programs for the unemployed.

The banners included demands and slogans such as "Against Racism, Against Pension Theft, For Child Care Rights", "Fight Forced Labor and Social Welfare Cuts", "Wake Up!", "Back to the Neanderthal Age With 27 Percent" [the FPÖ's vote], "I Mourn to See the FPÖ in Government", "Our Government? Liars and Psychos!" or "Stop It Before It Grows!".

Speakers, including artists, intellectuals and a few trade unionists, addressed the demonstration from platforms at the rallying points and from loudspeaker vans.

The director of the Vienna Theatre Festival, Luc Bondy,

explained that he had received a letter from the FPÖ. In it, the FPÖ gave him every artistic liberty, but also stated that his task was "to make good art, not politics". Artists and journalists roundly denounced the government's increased censorship and the firing of journalists critical of the new administration. FPÖ Party Chairman Peter Westenthaler, the new government's Minister of Cultural Affairs, announced recently that the state-run ORF television network will be "purged".

Journalist Gerhard Marschall called on the demonstrators to "fight for the freedom to have your own opinions". Marschall was fired by the newspaper *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* on the same day that the ÖVP/FPÖ government came to office. "Freedom of the press is necessary for journalism so that it can provide its most valuable service to society: keeping an eye on those who are in power. Journalism without freedom of the press is worthless."

Scientists, university professors and schoolteachers protested against the planned cuts in education. "Science must not become unpolitical", stated Edith Sauer from Vienna University's Institute of Modern History. She said that the dissolution of the Ministry for Women by the coalition government should in itself be cause for grave concern.

The demonstration was organized by Demokratische Offensive, a loosely structured umbrella organization, the Republican Club and SOS Mitmensch (SOS Fellow Humans). It was backed by other organizations and groups, including the Greens and the Liberal Forum, a breakaway group of former FPÖ members. The social democratic SPÖ and the Austrian trade union federation ÖGB also came but gave the impression that they were trying to hide from the results of their own policies.

None of the official speakers addressed the reasons for the election success of the right-wing FPÖ. The organizers spared the SPÖ leadership from the embarrassment of having to justify themselves in front of the demonstrators by not allowing any politicians to speak.

Behind the official facade of general unity against the ÖVP/FPÖ government, many who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* reporters were critical of the right-wing policies of the two preceding Social Democrat governments led by Viktor Klima and Franz Vranitzky. When asked about the reasons for

the FPÖ's election success, most blamed the SPÖ policies for the ascent of FPÖ leader Jörg Haider.

Andreas from Vienna, who has worked for Austrian Rail (ÖBB) for seven years as a stationmaster, said that the votes for the FPÖ were “a protest against the wheeling and dealing and graft that dominated the politics of the SPÖ and ÖVP for so many years and that had nothing in common anymore with politics for the people. The Social Democrats, in particular, acted against the interests of the people they were supposed to be representing. Where I work, job pressure and layoffs have been increasing for years. The workers are being sold out. You can see that in many other sectors too, for instance in the deregulation of shop business hours. Haider is continuing the same policies with a number of additions. And he can base himself on the anti-foreigner policies of the Social Democrats. I recall what Haider said about the Social Democratic Interior Minister in the last government, Wolfgang Schlögel: ‘He's our best man.’ Schlögel is known for the way he made the laws for foreign nationals more restrictive.”

Retired government employee Leopold Brödel, 76, a longtime SPÖ member, said: “The SPÖ has lost touch with the people. The graft they had going all the time with the ÖVP and the way they continually broke their promises have caused an enormous downslide of democracy. Now the result is there for all to see. Under the last two Social Democrat prime ministers, Viktor Klima and Franz Vranitzky, both of them technocrats, the SPÖ lost almost the entire working class, because the workers no longer felt they were being represented by it. On top of that, the SPÖ leaders were completely preoccupied with looking after their own selfish interests. All of that has created a huge vacuum between them and the rank-and-file members. That is why the reaction of the European Union, which throws all Austrians into the same pot, is completely blind and unjust. In order to understand the Haider phenomenon, you have to also understand Austrian history. There was even less of a break with fascism here than in Germany. After the war, almost all of the former Nazis were able to retain their positions; all they had to do was turn their coats.”

Claudia, a medical student, said: “Study conditions for poor students got drastically worse under the Social Democrats. Anyone who has to study beyond the time limit for a course, because he or she doesn't have rich parents and has to work, is no longer entitled to a government grant, and therefore to special reduced prices for students. People who are poor just can't get out of that vicious circle anymore.”

Markus, 27, who recently started working for Austrian Telecom, explained: “There has been an enormous alienation between the population and politics. I come from Carinthia province, from a very poor family. My father was a poor unskilled laborer. Normally, I would never have been able to go to college, but thanks to the policies of Bruno Kreisky (Austrian Federal Chancellor from 1970 to 1983) I was able to study. Up to then, workers who were too poor or had been ill

too long didn't have that option. Now all that is being cancelled, and people are being marginalized.

“There is increasing poverty in Austria, particularly among foreigners. When they came to Austria in the past, they helped build this country. Now all they get is the worst jobs, sorting mail or cleaning the streets. The foreigners were never integrated because they were never really welcome. That's what makes Haider successful. With his kind of anti-foreigner politics he really scores points with the bar room bigots.”

Almir Ibri, a Bosnian student of philosophy and art history, lived in Germany from 1992 to 1996, and then moved to Vienna. He said: “Haider is just like Milosevic or Izetbegovic. They divide the people and set one group against the other. They use nationalism to catch votes. Many people are deceived by Haider, but, basically, the vote for him was an act of stubbornness. The SPÖ is pursuing the same politics. The new citizenship law, for instance, was introduced by the SPÖ in 1993 or 1994. It now takes ten years for a foreigner to become an Austrian citizen. Before, it only took five years. As for housing, foreigners do not get the much cheaper and cleaner council apartments. Foreigners have to move into expensive privately owned houses. I think the European Union's reaction to Haider is exaggerated, although it is good that people aren't just keeping quiet.

“However, thinking back to my stay in Germany, I must say it was even worse there than it is here now. People coming from a country destroyed by war were treated like dirt. The policy towards foreigners was terrible for refugees, and now it is being continued. They want to deport people to an occupied and destroyed country without any hope. The new ÖVP/FPÖ government is frightening. At the University here in Vienna, we are all against it. Even the university staff are, and the professors openly attack Haider in their lectures, and explain what is so wrong about it.”

Retiree Hans Ertl summed up: “Haider wasn't elected because of his program, but despite that program. There is enormous dissatisfaction because the politicians are doing what the transnational companies tell them to do.”



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