Germany: Extreme right could make gains in upcoming elections in Hamburg

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Elections in Germany's northernmost metropolis could see the Social Democratic Party (SPD) kicked out of city hall. According to many reports, the vote on September 23 could well mean the end of SPD rule, after many decades in charge of the second largest German city. Opinion polls give Conservative and rightwing extremist parties a clear lead.

But hardly one media comment has drawn any connection between more than 50 years of SPD rule—apart from 1953-57—Hamburg's mayor has been a Social Democrat since 1946—and the increasing influence of rightwing parties in the city.

In a metropolis that likes to present itself as particularly cosmopolitan, rightwing political tendencies have been developing over a long period. In October 1997, *Gleichheit* (the German-language magazine of the *World Socialist Web Site*) wrote about the results of the last Hamburg elections: "Whoever wants to see the political future, should look more closely at the election result in the Hanseatic city on the Elbe. As in a prism, political conditions are becoming visible in Hamburg, which are very informative for evaluating the coming developments. In Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg and other working class districts, the fairy tale of the SPD being the lesser evil was thoroughly disproved."

At that time, the SPD was able to retain its hold on city hall thanks to a coalition with the Green Alternative List (GAL), but the rightwing parties made substantial gains. Despite a crisis, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) increased its vote by over five percent and the neo-fascist German Peoples Union (DVU) only narrowly failed to clear the five percent hurdle to enter city hall. In certain districts, like Wilhelmsburg, Billbrook or Harburg, the DVU won almost 20 percent of the vote.

The reason for this was an SPD election campaign under the then mayor Henning Voscherau, based on extreme law-and-order slogans. Voscherau said, for example, that too many "criminal foreigners" would clog up German prisons and therefore a more consistent deportation policy should ensure they returned to their home countries. In the following legislative period the SPD and GAL then carried out this rightwing policy in practice.

Now the next elections are imminent, and if the opinion polls are to be believed, the Hamburg SPD faces a disaster. According to the pollsters, the Social Democrats would win 35 percent of the vote and would presumably lose their governing majority.

A so-called "citizens' bloc" is campaigning for a "turnaround on the Elbe". This bloc consists of Ole von Beust's Hamburg CDU, the liberal democratic FDP under retired rear admiral Rudolf Lange, and the *Partei Rechstaatlicher Offensive* (PRO, Constitutional Offensive Party) better known as the "Schill Party". The founder of this dubious organization is the former criminal judge Roland Barnabas Schill.

Schill gained wide press coverage, particularly for his extremely harsh guilty verdicts, which also earned him the name "Judge Merciless". His party, which polls forecast could win up to 15 percent, lies on the far right of the political spectrum. PRO is a classic law-and-order movement, whose central election slogan is "internal security".

Schill calls for a reduction in the age of criminal responsibility, harsher sentences particularly in cases involving foreigners and youth, further restrictions on the right to asylum, all convicted foreigners to be deported, a beefing up of the police, spending cuts in the area of culture as well as substantially harsher measures to be taken against those found guilty of minor offences such as spraying graffiti, riding public transport without a ticket, etc. The latest and most scurrilous of his demands are for the jailing of parents who do not supervise their children properly, and for the castration of sexual re-offenders.

After the CDU has also made the topic of "internal security" the main question in its election campaign, and had already signalled a year ago that it would form a coalition with Schill, the FDP has also fallen behind this political line. With the blessing of Guido Westerwelle, the FDP's national Secretary-General (who has already said that he wants to make the question of national identity a theme at the next federal elections), Lange finally rejected a possible coalition with the SPD and GAL, declaring in favour of a coalition with Schill and the CDU.

This substantially raises the possibility that an extreme rightwing Interior Senator and deputy mayor Roland Schill could in future govern "Germany's gateway to the world", as Hamburg likes to present itself.

The responsibility for this lies, however, with the SPD, the trade unions and the GAL. In hardly any other city have social divisions and polarization progressed so far and are so clearly visible. Under many years of Social Democratic leadership, the Hanseatic city has become one of the richest in Europe. Hamburg is a hub for the service industry, media and trade, and is one of the most important economic centres of Northern Europe, offering a home for approximately 5,000 millionaires.

But poverty and deprivation are growing in working class areas even faster than the ostentatious wealth of the mansion district.

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According to official figures, over 150,000 people in the city are dependent on welfare benefits, including approximately 60,000 children—about 20 percent of all Hamburg's children. About 1,000 do not have a roof over their head. Certain districts threaten to sink into poverty in their entirety. Taxable incomes in St.Pauli, Dulsberg, Wilhelmsburg or Harburg are only 60 percent of the Hamburg average.

In the last legislative period, numerous areas of social spending in the areas of health, elderly care, education, culture and ecology have fallen victim to cuts implemented by the SPD and GAL. On the other hand, the city gave out around 1.15 billion marks ($533 million) from tax revenues, in order to encourage companies like EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company) to base their operations in the city's Finkenwerder district. The vague promise by EADS to create about 4,000 jobs in Hamburg in the future, was sufficient to create consensus between the trade unions, SPD/GAL and the CDU, aimed at offering this European defence corporation almost unlimited tax breaks.

The increasing poverty and its effects are without doubt the soil on which figures such as Schill can develop. But by itself, this does not explain the phenomenon. To enable this growth, the rightwing organization receives definite nourishment from the SPD in city hall. This comprises the expressly reactionary law-and-order propaganda of the governing party, larded with racist demagogy, and the policy of defending "Hamburg's economy".

Panicking in the face of defeat at the polls, Hamburg's SPD chief Olaf Scholz and General Secretary Franz Muentefering have denounced Roland Schill. They call him a reactionary who would be politically dangerous for Hamburg. Although this is certainly true, this reproach rebounds on their own party.

In his utterances about foreigners, social policy and "internal security", Schill bases his policy on famous and well-known personalities in the SPD. It was Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder who called for convicted foreigners to be "rapidly" deported. It was the present Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping who said so-called "welfare parasites" should have their benefits removed and that an obligation to work be introduced.

Hamburg's present Interior Senator and SPD party chief Olaf Scholz, in office since May, introduced the use of emetics by the police against those suspected of drug dealing. Scholz had replaced the previous Interior Senator Hartmuth Wrocklage, regarded as too soft and liberal and too involved in party nepotism, saying he wanted to take stronger action against crime and corruption.

And finally, there is former mayor Voscherau, who seconds Schill and says that his successor in office Ortwin Runde is too soft, too liberal and has underestimated the "security needs of the population".

Even if Olaf Scholz says that a future Interior Senator Schill would be dangerous for Hamburg, he does not have in mind the fate of the poor, the homeless and "illegal" immigrants living in the city, who would suffer all the more from the arbitrary actions of a fortified police force. He is far more concerned with the reputation of Hamburg as an economic centre and a "cosmopolitan and liberal" city.

The PRO election slate

A short glance at the election team of this organisation makes clear that Schill is not only recruiting voters but also his personnel from the old parties.

In second place on the party list after Schill is Mario Mettbach, a soldier, who came from the CDU and the *Statt Partei* (another Hamburg-based rightwing party) and will be responsible for the PRO's traffic policy. He presents himself as the motorist's friend, who wants to extend the road system and put an end to the "pampering" of cyclists.

The party's second chairman, the lawyer Dirk Nockemann, comes from the SPD. Nockemann chairs the PRO's so-called working group on foreigners' rights. He brings with him an important qualification for Schill: Nockemann is director of the Office for Asylum and Refugee Affairs in neighbouring Mecklenburg-Pomerania, a state ruled by a coalition of the SPD and PDS (the Party of Democratic Socialism, successor to the former East German governing party).

Then there is Norbert Fruehauf, who is an attorney and chairman of the German Trade Association. He also comes from the CDU, where he won his spurs in local politics. Fruehauf is responsible for party finances.

Real estate broker Katrin Freund is the party's election campaign organiser. She is one of the few who has not gained any political experience in other parties, however, she is Roland Schill's partner.

Schill will probably gain votes in both the poor run-down districts and in the well-off middle class areas. This will be at the expense of the SPD and the CDU. Moreover, it is to be expected that some voters who previously gave their support to the DVU and the equally rightwing *Republikaner* will vote for Schill. Although Dirk Nockemann protests that his party does not represent rightwing political thinking, the opinion polls show that most of its voters come from this end of the spectrum.

As if to underline this, in an interview in May 2000 about Schill's election prospects, Henning Voscherau said: "Judge Schill with his *völkisch* extreme rightwing movement can take away eight to ten percent from the SPD in Hamburg, and above all mobilise former Social Democratic non-voters."

Voscherau, who left city hall after losing the election in 1997, is now positioning himself for the period after the upcoming elections. In the event that Runde loses the election, politicians from the rightwing of the SPD and influential Hamburg business personalities are talking about a return by Voscherau to active politics. Voscherau says that he would not refuse such a call, but only if the SPD's defeat at the polls caused a "political emergency", and also only on "iron-clad" political conditions. By mutual agreement, discussions between big business and Voscherau are shrouded in silence. Hamburg's elite in the wealthy districts can be content with their SPD.

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