

Germany: Hamburg elections deliver a serious warning

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For the first time since the end of the war and the Nazi dictatorship, the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats are helping an extreme rightwing party into power. This is the most important result of the Hamburg city-state elections last month. Up to now, all Germany's parliamentary parties had always stressed they would never cooperate with far right parties. Now this much-vaunted "democratic consensus" is a thing of the past.

The *Partei Rechtstaatlicher Offensive* (PRO, Constitutional Offensive Party) won almost 20 percent of the vote. The party, headed by rightwing populist Judge Roland Barnabas Schill, was only formed last year. With a 36.5 percent share, the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Hamburg was able to maintain its vote (up by 0.3 percent) and remained the strongest party. But the SPD's coalition partners from the Green Alternative List (GAL) lost a third of their vote, dropping to 8.5 percent. This result means the "red-green" coalition in Hamburg has lost its majority.

The Free Democrats (FDP), who had previously held no seats in city hall as they fell short of the 5 percent-hurdle, this time reached 5.1 percent, giving the so-called "citizen's bloc" of the Christian Democrats (CDU), the FDP and Schill's party a slim majority.

PRO, with its aggressive law-and-order campaign and rightwing demagoguery, was able to exploit the plight and growing fears of many people in the industrial quarters and working class districts, where there is high unemployment and above average dependency on welfare benefits. Even before the election, the right-wing party had been expected to do well in districts like Wilhelmsburg or Dulsberg and the densely populated areas in east Hamburg—Billstedt, Billbrook, Jenfeld, Rothenburgsort, Horn etc.

The political responsibility for this rests with the previous SPD-led city government. Since 1946, apart from only one occasion (1953-57), the SPD has headed the city-state administration. The SPD is responsible for the extreme social polarisation that has developed. Hamburg is the site of many big industrial concerns and trade corporations, as well as some of the largest publishing houses and media groups. It is one of the richest cities in Europe and is home to some 5,000 millionaires. On the other hand, poverty has increased sharply, with above average unemployment, homelessness and welfare recipients, including 60,000 children.

Whereas in the past, the decline of whole districts and rising crime were met by targeted measures to improve social conditions, during the last years the SPD has changed its standpoint. While implementing harsh cuts and allowing many districts to completely rot, it no longer considers rising crime to be a social problem, but purely a criminal and police matter. It began to compete with the conservative parties to tighten up laws and criminal sentences.

This only succeeded in strengthening the right wing parties by shifting the political debate onto their territory. A similar phenomenon could be observed in the 1998 state elections in Saxony-Anhalt, when the neo-fascist German People's Union (DVU) suddenly won 13 percent of the vote. Also in other places with above-average unemployment, rightwing parties have succeeded in diverting the fear of further social decline along reactionary channels.

What is new in the Hamburg election is that some of the establishment parties—which had previously expressed themselves clearly against cooperating with the radical rightwing and especially against them being given any government responsibility—are now helping the far right come to power. This is a conscious political decision, which was taken at national level and which has far-reaching significance.

To conceal the implications of the CDU/CSU and FDP's decision, a campaign has begun in the media to minimise the PRO's significance. The party is described as being "clearly conservative", but not on the extreme right. It is said not to be racist, but merely advocates the "legitimate point of view" that foreigners convicted of committing crimes should be deported immediately, because otherwise they would overload the German prisons.

On the eve of the election, CDU General Secretary Laurenz Meyer stressed that the views of the PRO and Christian Democrats were "almost identical" on the fight against crime and internal security. Hesse state premier Roland Koch (CDU), who won the state elections two years ago by waging a campaign against dual citizenship that was tinged with racism, and who has since become the spokesman of the CDU rightwing, demanded that the Christian Democrats cooperate with Schill's party in Hamburg. On Tuesday, Koch stressed the "national political significance" of a change of power to the conservatives in "red-green Hamburg". He spoke of the fact that the "single issue politics of Mr Schill" stretch deep into the CDU.

The argument that the PRO is a "single issue party" whose views on other topics are unknown and would first have to be found out in coalition negotiations is just as groundless as the assertion that since, as a judge, Roland Schill has sworn an oath to uphold the constitution, he cannot therefore be a right-wing radical politician. Rather, the fact he concentrates his politics on strengthening the state and domestic security distinguishes him as an extreme rightwing demagogue. In the vocabulary of Judge Schill, the notion of the "law" only exists in the form of criminal law. Democratic rights, individual civil rights and liberties do not figure. Schill demands the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility, drastic increases in sentences, particularly for convicted foreigners and youth, further limitations to the right of asylum, the deportation of all foreigners convicted of a crime, giving

further powers to the police, making cuts in the area of culture as well as treating more harshly such petty offences like daubing graffiti and riding on public transport without a ticket. In the election campaign, he also called for prison sentences for parents who do not supervise their children properly, and the castration of recidivist sexual offenders.

Five years ago he justified his reputation as “Judge Merciless”, when he sentenced a mentally ill woman to two and a half years imprisonment because she had scratched some cars. He gave the same punishment to an Indian man who had tried to get a residency permit using forged documents. An authoritarian state that rides roughshod over every democratic right is the quintessential programme of Schill’s party.

The decision of the CDU/CSU and FDP to cooperate with Schill’s party, bringing it into the government of Germany’s second largest city, has deep social roots. It is not only a result of the hunger for political power by the CDU in Hamburg, which has tried in vain for 44 years to take charge of city hall. If it were simply a matter of getting their noses in the trough in a large metropolis after long years of being on the outside, an alliance with the SPD to form a grand coalition would be an option for the CDU.

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and the campaign for domestic security that has dominated the headlines since then have contributed to Schill’s ascent, but are not its cause. They have only accelerated a development that has been underway for a long time. The CDU and the FDP had expressed themselves in favour of a coalition with Schill for some time before September 11, and thereby helped to make the rightwing demagogue socially acceptable.

In view of the ever clearer effects of the international economic crisis, rising unemployment and growing social polarisation, a majority of the political elite favours the rapid and systematic strengthening of the state apparatus and the tightening up of the criminal law, at the same time pushing through cuts in welfare benefits and dismantling democratic rights. Herein lies the reason why their previous scruples about cooperating with the radical right-wing parties are being abandoned.

The fact that the Hamburg CDU under Ole von Beust, who was previously counted among the moderates around the national party chairwomen Angela Merkel, is now helping the far right to come to power in the city marks a turning point in the development of the CDU/CSU. The battle inside the CDU for the political direction of the party, which began following its defeat in the general election three years ago and the resignation of its long-standing chairman Helmut Kohl, has moved one step closer to being resolved. The rightwing faction in the CDU under Roland Koch and CSU chairman Edmund Stoiber is going on the offensive.

The new city-state government will seek to establish a decidedly authoritarian regime and suppress every opposition to increasing impoverishment. There are parallel developments in other European countries, for example in Italy. There Silvio Berlusconi in combination with the post-fascist National Alliance took over government power in the spring, following five years of cutbacks in the welfare system under a centre-left coalition, which included the post-communists, Greens and Christian Democrats. In Britain, the Conservative Party has chosen a representative of the extreme rightwing as the new leader. Last year in Austria, the rightwing and openly racist party of Jörg Haider took over important ministries in the government.

In Hamburg, the Greens have suffered their sixteenth consecutive

defeat in state elections. Some commentators are already writing obituaries for the party. If the German armed forces participate in America’s “war against terrorism”, many believe this could lead to the party splitting and would also seal the premature end of the red-green coalition at national level.

At the beginning of the 1980s, when the Greens began their spectacular rise, entering one state government after another, they were regarded by many as a leftwing alternative to the SPD. Many members and voters hoped that the Greens would put a halt to the rightwing course politics had taken under SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and then intensified under CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl, preventing the dismantling of democratic rights, rising defence spending, cutbacks in the welfare system and a worsening environment. In 1998, the SPD and the Greens owed their election victory at national level to the growing opposition to the rightwing policies of the Kohl government.

However, from the beginning the hopes set in the Greens were built on sand. In the first place, what characterised their programme was the rejection of any independent political perspective for the working class. Their timid reformist proposals were not meant to place any question mark over the foundations of capitalist society. They were meant to trap the growing opposition to the prevailing political conditions, and not to give it an alternative orientation. Once the levers of power were in their hands, the Greens immediately dropped their reformist demands.

In Hamburg, this development took on particularly crude forms. On all major questions, Hamburg’s Greens stood on the leftwing of the party. The majority of the Maoist KB (Communist League) had joined the Green Alternative List and spread the illusion that a “left reformist policy” could be pursued through an alliance with the SPD. In the city-state elections in 1993 the GAL gained more than 13 percent of the vote, and even improved slightly on this result in 1997.

In the course of a single legislative period, the party has reached rock bottom. The Greens supported the cuts in social programmes on a regional level, as well as the national decision to deploy the German military in the Balkans. Last spring, when Hamburg’s SPD leader Olaf Scholz took over the city-state’s Interior Department and tried to outdo the rightwing demagogue Schill by advocating particularly drastic domestic security measures, the GAL lent him their support.

The most important political lesson from Hamburg, is that the red-green coalition is not an alternative to the CDU/CSU and FDP, and is certainly not the lesser evil. Rather, the SPD and GAL have created the conditions under which the most rightwing elements can assert themselves and win the upper hand.



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