

SPD government falls in Saxony-Anhalt

German Social Democrats routed by conservatives in state election

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Only five months in advance of a national election, Germany's ruling coalition parties, the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Greens, have suffered a dramatic defeat in elections held last Sunday in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt. The SPD, which governed the state in the eastern part of Germany for the past eight years, was catapulted out of office. It lost nearly two-thirds of its vote. In an election marked by a drastic decline in voter participation, the SPD won only 20 percent of the votes cast.

In comparison with the last state election four years ago, this represents a loss of 15.9 percent—the biggest ever decline in votes recorded by the SPD in a state election.

The Green Party, which on a national level holds the offices of foreign minister and vice chancellor (Joschka Fischer), as well as two other ministerial posts, already failed four years ago to reach the 5 percent necessary under German law to enter parliament. As a result, the Greens were not represented in the state parliament in Saxony-Anhalt. This time around, the Green Party lost over half of its voters and slumped to just 2 percent of the vote.

The Saxony-Anhalt election was the last state poll before the national elections in September of this year. It was not only a debacle for Germany's ruling parties, it was also a popular repudiation of the so-called Magdeburg model (named after the main city in the state), which denotes a minority SPD government "tolerated" by the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor organisation to the ruling Stalinist party in the former East Germany). Although the PDS was not officially part of the governing coalition, it supported virtually all of the measures introduced by the state's prime minister, Reinhard Höppner (SPD). PDS complicity in SPD policies did not prevent PDS party functionaries from criticising the social consequences of these policies—mass unemployment and a decline in living standards—in the course of the election campaign.

Up to now the PDS had been able to profit from social protest in the states of former East Germany and increase its vote. In this latest election it was not punished in a similar manner to the SPD, and with 20.4 percent even recorded a small percentage increase (0.8 percent), to become the second strongest party in Saxony-Anhalt. In absolute figures, however, the PDS lost one sixth of its voters—obtaining 57,000 fewer votes than in elections held four years ago.

The party that profited from discontent with the Magdeburg

model was the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). That party's share of the vote increased by 15.5 percent, nearly equalling the loss recorded by the SPD. The CDU won a total of 37.3 percent of the vote and gained the largest number of seats in the new parliament.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP), a traditionally middle-of-the-road, pro-market bourgeois party that has no representation in any of the state parliaments of the former East Germany, confounded expectations by increasing its share of the vote in Saxony-Anhalt. The party won 13.3 percent, an increase of 9.1 percent, and will enter the next state government as junior partner to the CDU.

In the course of the election campaign the FDP staked its claim to be the party of the middle class, calling for support for small businesses, cuts in taxes for small employers and the self-employed, and the gutting of government rules and regulations on business operations. With its slogan "Politics should once again be pleasurable!" it won support above all from the small layer of rising petty bourgeois in the region, who are determined to defend their privileges at all costs.

Political responsibility for the "hellish decline of the SPD" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) lies with the social democrats themselves. For eight years, with the support of the PDS, the Höppner government carried out economic and social policies directed against the population at large, creating a situation that can accurately be described as catastrophic.

Situated on two rivers, the Elbe and the Saale, Saxony-Anhalt previously had the second biggest concentration of industry in Germany, surpassed only by the Ruhr area. In the period of the former East Germany, large chemical factories in Bitterfeld, Halle and Leuna employed over 120,000. Magdeburg was the centre for East German engineering, and in the region of Mansfeld thousands were employed in copper mining.

Today, Saxony-Anhalt has the highest level of unemployment in all of Germany. Last year the official jobless rate was 21.4 percent. This figure recorded only those registered as seeking employment and receiving some sort of support from employment offices. Thousands of school leavers, who have never worked and are therefore not entitled to unemployment support, are not included in this figure. Nor are many long-term unemployed who receive social support.

In many workers' quarters in former centres of industry, one

third are unemployed. Some 86,000 are dependent on social assistance, which is being continuously cut. Thousands are seeking work in other regions and every year the percentage of those capable of working in the region declines by an average of 1.5 percent. There is no comparable migration in any other German state. As a result of factory closures and worker migration, tax revenues in the state have fallen. The reaction of the Höppner government was to work out and impose—in collaboration with the PDS—new spending cuts in all major areas of social welfare.

Youth and leisure centres were closed down on a large scale, along with sport and educational facilities. Typical was the government's treatment of the budget for nurseries, kindergarten and children's daytime facilities. The budget was cut by a third two years ago, resulting in the dismissal of several thousand teaching staff. A total of 80 million euros were saved, while a generous programme of financial subsidies was simultaneously made available to small and middle-sized businesses. Last year, the state's debt rose to 17 billion euros, exceeding the total income of the state by more than 5 million.

Against a background of growing impoverishment and a lack of any serious political alternative for the working population, social tensions have continuously mounted. Incidences of crime are on the increase. Although just 45,000 foreigners live in the state (1.7 percent of the population), Saxony-Anhalt has the highest level of right-wing and racially motivated crimes of violence. The only response from the state government has been a succession of measures to strengthen police powers.

State Prime Minister Höppner likes to present himself as a figure of moderation, playing down the significance of all problems and reassuring the population in the manner of a country priest. At the same time, his minister of the interior, Manfred Püchel, has been systematically building up the police and state apparatus.

Two years ago a new law was introduced allowing for video monitoring of public places and streets, as well as a so-called "expanded expulsion" regulation that enables the police to ban "undesirables" from certain areas of the city centre. In this respect, the state government anticipated measures that were first introduced in other countries following last September's terror attacks in New York and Washington.

The state government has also encouraged an expansion of the powers of private security services. The SPD carried out its build-up of police powers with the support of the CDU and without serious opposition from the PDS.

New drafts are being circulated for a further expansion of police powers. Additional security custody regulations, for example, have already been agreed upon by the SPD and CDU, whereby a perpetrator could be held in detention even after he had fulfilled his sentence.

In no other German state is the social and political crisis so evident as in Saxony-Anhalt. Hopes and illusions in economic advancement and democratic progress that were so widespread at the beginning of the 1990s have been replaced by resignation and bitterness. This was reflected last Sunday in the huge number of eligible voters who abstained. Nearly half of all voters (45 percent) in effect rejected all of the parties and the entire political establishment.

Abstention was also high in elections held eight years ago. At that time popular anger was directed against a CDU government that, in the period following German reunification, had enriched itself in a thoroughly unprincipled manner. Then the Höppner government took power, initially in an alliance with the Greens and with the "toleration" of the PDS. But the SPD-led government had no answer to the great social problems confronting the state.

Four years ago the neo-fascist German Peoples Union (Deutsche Volksumion—DVU) attempted to divert the desperation of people out of work and dependent on social assistance along racist channels. In their first attempt, these right-wing demagogues were able to win 13 percent of the vote.

Shortly afterwards, the DVU parliamentary fraction broke apart amid allegations of corruption. Nevertheless, the party's initial success revealed the political dangers arising from the growing social crisis. The DVU did not stand in Sunday's election, but in its place another extreme right-wing organisation, led by former judge and current interior minister for the city of Hamburg, Ronald Barnabas Schill, participated, but failed to gain the 5 percent required for parliamentary representation.

The election result has definite repercussions for national politics and inaugurates a further political turn to the right. With the emergence of a CDU-FDP state government in Magdeburg, the SPD has finally lost the narrow majority it enjoyed in the second chamber (Bundesrat) of the national parliament. From now on, the national government will be unable to pass any law, requiring the support of the Bundesrat, without the collaboration of the CDU. The CDU is therefore in a position to block parliamentary initiatives of the SPD-Green government. This will further encourage Edmund Stoiber, the candidate of the Union parties (Christian Democrats and Christian Social Union) in the upcoming election for chancellor, to pursue a strategy based on mobilising the most backward social layers.

The political establishment is turning increasingly to the right and is preparing for large-scale social conflicts. In the course of just three electoral periods, the people of Saxony-Anhalt have had a crash course in politics, with important lessons. None of the official parties, including the PDS, is prepared to put the interests of working people before the profit interests of the banks and major corporations. An alternative perspective cannot be achieved by mere abstention, but requires the construction of a party that fights for a socialist perspective.



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