

Bavaria state election: A growing gulf between establishment politics and the people

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The result of the Bavaria state election held Sunday, September 21 indicates broad public rejection of the measures undertaken by the SPD (German Social Democratic Party)-Green Party government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, aimed at dismantling the German welfare state. The response to the election result by established German political parties and employers organisations has been to declare their determination to press ahead in coming months with further attacks on the social fabric—despite widespread public opposition.

On the first anniversary of the government's federal election victory in September 2002, the SPD lost around 704,000 voters in the Bavarian election. Its share of the vote slumped by nearly 10 percent from 28.7 percent (in the 1998 state election) to just 19.6 percent. This is the worst result ever recorded by the SPD in Bavaria.

Voter participation, which stood at 70 percent of those able to vote in the 1998 state election, dropped last Sunday to just 57.3 percent. Only 5.2 million of a total of more than 9 million eligible voters cast ballots.

This high level of abstention favoured in the first place the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU—based in Bavaria) led by the existing state prime minister, Edmund Stoiber. In the 2002 federal elections, Stoiber was the main conservative rival to Chancellor Schröder. Although on Sunday the CSU received 43,000 votes less than in 1998, the collapse of the SPD vote meant that it recorded 60.7 percent of the votes cast, giving the party a two-thirds majority of the 180 seats in the Bavarian state parliament.

The Green Party vote increased by 2 percent to 7.7 percent. Other parties, including Germany's liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), failed to win the minimum 5 percent of the vote necessary for representation in parliament according to German electoral law.

While the CSU has dominated politics in Bavaria for more than four decades, last Sunday's result indicates a qualitative change in political relations in the state. It is the first time in the history of the postwar republic that a party—at either the federal or state level—has been able to achieve a two-thirds majority. The collapse in the vote for the SPD made clear that the party is in the process of losing the last vestiges of support from those layers who had remained loyal to the party for decades. The first post-election opinion polls reveal that the SPD lost 15 percent of its support among workers and clerical employees, and 23 percent among the

unemployed.

According to an opinion poll carried out by the Infratest-Dimap institute, a total of 334,000 traditional SPD voters did not turn out to vote. In addition, the SPD lost 189,000 voters to the CSU, 62,000 to the Green Party and 34,000 to other parties. Abstention was also high amongst layers of traditional CSU voters (297,000), but was still far less than the abstention rate amongst SPD supporters.

In autumn 2002, the SPD and the Green Party were able to record a narrow victory over the opposition parties in national elections. The SPD and Greens had initially taken over power from the conservative coalition led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1998. The SPD and Greens clearly profited in 2002 from the public stance taken by Schröder against the war in Iraq. They were able to appeal to a broad anti-war sentiment and mobilise voters who under normal circumstances would have been unlikely to vote again for the government.

However, Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer were never consistent in their antiwar stance and allowed US troops the full use of military infrastructure on German soil to conduct the war. Now Schröder and Fischer are increasingly intent on patching up differences with the American president. In fact, the government leadership has shown much more backbone when it comes to the issue of attacking and dismantling social programs and democratic rights. With government support, a new public service wage agreement was imposed in January 2003 that involved clear cuts in income for public service workers. Two months later, after the massive antiwar demonstrations had just subsided, the chancellor announced his "Agenda 2010"—a new programme involving massive cuts to the German welfare state.

If one recalls the speeches made against "Agenda 2010" by leading members of the Bavaria trade union organisations during protest meetings held at the end of May 2003, then the reason for the collapse in support for the SPD on Sunday becomes clear. It was an expression of broad discontent with the social injustice arising from the policies of the SPD-Green government.

At mass meetings at that time, leading trade unionists, who normally work closely with the government, attempted to head off growing anger within broad layers of workers. Their speeches gave an indication of the disquiet building up amongst grassroots members.

The chairman of the DGB in Bavaria, Fritz Schösser, declared on May 24 in Nuremberg: "In elections in 1998 and 2002 the trade

unions agitated for different and better policies. We sought to ensure electoral defeat for Kohl with his failed politics for the dismantling of the welfare state and unjust taxation policies.... We did not undertake such efforts only for the policies introduced by Kohl to be pursued, and in part with increased vehemence, by different people.”

The regional head of the metal workers union (IG Metall) in Bavaria, Werner Neugebauer, stated in similar fashion: “We are not interested in a government which forces the unemployed to be dependent on social assistance, which undermines protection against dismissal, which creates impossible conditions for employment schemes and seeks to privatise state health insurance.”

Just a few weeks later, in June, IG Metall called off a strike in progress aimed at achieving equal wages in the east and west of the country, thereby establishing the basis for a further offensive against Germany’s welfare state.

Reductions in the time period for the receipt of unemployment pay for workers aged 45 and older, the ending of employers’ contributions to health payments, pension cuts, a lengthening of the working life, removal of redundancy protection—all of the measures that constitute “Agenda 2010”—are aimed at wiping out the extensive social reforms introduced in the 1970s and early ’80s in Germany, pushing towards the imposition of “American conditions.” The years of experience by broad masses of people with such permanent cuts and attacks on the welfare fabric have resulted in the devastating electoral defeat of the SPD in Bavaria.

While the media prefers to portray the image of an effective state government in Bavaria under the leadership of its loyal and paternalistic master, Edmund Stoiber—who has protected jobs, education, economic growth, etc.—the reality is very different. Unemployment in the state (6.6 percent) is lower than the national average (10.4 percent). But there are profound regional differences between conditions in the state capital of Munich—with the highest living costs of any German city—and more remote countryside areas, where unemployment hovers at 12 percent. This is closer to the high rates of unemployment in the east of the country.

The economic situation in Bavaria has also worsened markedly over the past year and a half. During this period 18,000 jobs have been lost in the state’s steel and electrical component industries. Well-known firms such as Babcock, Grundig, Dornier and Compaq have drastically reduced their workforces. In the course of 2002 there was a dramatic increase in youth unemployment in the state.

In fact, the electoral victory of the CSU in Bavaria had nothing to do with its inflated claims of economic and social prosperity, but was much more a product of broad disgust for the policies emanating from Berlin.

The established parties have reacted to the election result with what can only be described as a declaration of war on the German people. Immediately after the result was known, leading social democrats, prominent members of the CDU/CSU and media commentators stressed that the issue now was to push ahead with even more drastic cuts and savings in the face of popular opposition.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder argued: “The people are afraid of

change” and that his reform plans have not been effective because they have not been fully implemented. “That is also the reason why I will make clear that we do not, and cannot afford to, have any intention of changing the course we have undertaken with Agenda 2010,” he said.

The CDU prime minister for the state of Hessen, Roland Koch, boasted on television on the evening of the election of his own capacity for “political leadership,” which consists of implementing unpopular measures with steely determination. When asked his response to the broad opposition to the government’s social “reform” measures, he retorted: “We politicians cannot afford to be fixated by what others say.”

Koch was largely in agreement with the social democratic mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), who on the same programme concurred that there should be “no change to the reform course.” According to Wowereit, it was necessary to implement radical cuts—“without delay or hesitation.”

Agreement on this point came from Heinrich von Pierer, chairman of the global giant Siemens. He called upon the conservative opposition to work together with the government, and stressed that the German Employers Institute fully backed Schröder’s “Agenda 2010.” What was now necessary, according to von Pierer, was “clear political leadership, which did not take up and lose time with every consideration.”

The Bavarian state election has made unmistakably clear the chasm developing between the political establishment in Germany and broad layers of the population—a gulf that is increasingly evident to those in power. Further attacks being prepared on the German welfare state by these forces are incompatible with traditional democratic means.

In this respect, the entreaties offered by various academics and professors on election night represent a clear warning. Political scientist Jürgen Falter called for the “coming together of all political forces” in order to overcome the “egoism of the people.” He said the issue was to tackle the widespread “hostility to reform,” a position that has developed over a period of time and that now had to be overcome by a “process of re-education.” At the same time, according to Falter, “there is a lack of recognition that this will cause pain.”

According to his colleague, Professor Meinhard Miegel: “The main problem is the people themselves.” They have become accustomed to certain social standards over the past 30 years and regard any concrete proposal for reform as unacceptable. Working people must take heed of the contempt for democratic processes and the will of the people so clearly expressed in such remarks.



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