

Austria: Social democrats form coalition in Carinthia with Haider

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Just one week after state elections in Carinthia, the southernmost state in Austria, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) has agreed to form a governing coalition with the extreme-right Freedom Party (FP) led by Jörg Haider.

Haider has led the local government in Carinthia for the past 10 years. In the recent election campaign, the social democrats had propagated the slogan: “Every vote for the SPÖ is a vote to get rid of Haider.” Now the SPÖ has itself struck a deal with the FP on April 1 to assure Haider the necessary majority to continue as state prime minister and establish a coalition government.

Social democrat deputies will not vote directly, but an arrangement has been struck that sufficient deputies will leave the chamber during the appropriate vote to ensure a majority for the Haider party.

Although a coalition of three parties—the SPÖ, the conservative Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the Greens—together have a parliamentary majority and would have been in a position to drive Haider out of power in the state that has constituted his traditional power base, the social democrats rejected this option. A number of press sources report that the SPÖ did not even consider this possibility. State head of the SPÖ, Peter Ambrozy, justified this stance by claiming that a three-way coalition against the FPÖ contravened the will of the electorate.

A glance at the election result tells a very different story. Although Haider utilised his post as the head of this small state, inundating the 425,000 potential voters with election propaganda, a smaller number voted for him than did five years previously. Only the low level of voter turnout enabled the FP to record a slightly better percentage vote of 42.5.

In state elections held in Salzburg on the same day,

the FPÖ suffered a devastating defeat and lost half its votes. The party lost 10.9 percent of its previous total to slump to just 8.7 percent. Haider’s party had already suffered double-figure vote losses in state elections last year in Lower and Upper Austria and in the Tirol—behind the Greens and falling to fourth place in the ranks of Austrian parties.

Voters were giving their own answer to the dramatic cuts made to the Austrian welfare state carried out at a national level by Austria’s governing coalition of the Peoples Party and Freedom Party. In his notorious demagogic manner, Haider concentrated in his Carinthia election campaign on attacks on the ÖVP. The result was that the ÖVP lost nearly half its vote and recorded its worst-ever result—11.6 percent.

Broad opposition to the national government in Vienna resulted in increased votes for the SPÖ and the Greens. The SPÖ in Carinthia increased its percentage vote by 5.6 points and recorded its best-ever result in the state—38.4 percent. The Greens, which had not stood candidates five years ago, won 6.7 percent. In Salzburg, the SPÖ increased its percentage vote by 13 points (winning a total of 45.4 percent) and will head the next government there.

The decision by the SPÖ to form a coalition with Haider in Carinthia represents a blow to many voters and has also been met with considerable opposition inside the party. The Vienna newspaper *Der Standard* reports numerous calls from disappointed and angry SPÖ voters. Anger amongst rank-and-file SPÖ voters is widespread: “In the SPÖ locales the telephone has not stopped ringing, and the message is the same. We voted for Ambrozy (SPÖ) in order to stop Haider. We have been duped.”

Lower-level party functionaries were barely able to contain the anger, and admitted that they too only heard

of the “pact with the devil” through the media. Groups such as the SPÖ youth, women and student organisations, as well as the League of Socialist Academics, which had agitated in the election campaign in support of the SPÖ and against Haider, registered their vigorous opposition. The decision to undertake a coalition with Haider was made independently of the membership of the party.

After the decision, the state head of the SPÖ, Peter Ambrozy, sought to counter criticism and play down the issue. The decision, he emphasised in a number of interviews, is limited to the state of Carinthia and has no significance for national politics. But this is just eyewash. The decision by the SPÖ to enter a coalition with the FP clearly amounts to a positive re-evaluation of Jörg Haider’s extreme-right party on a national level. The decision for a coalition was not made in Klagenfurt, the main city of Carinthia, but in Vienna, and constitutes a further dramatic lurch to the right by Austrian social democracy.

Despite all claims to the contrary, the coalition in Carinthia sends a signal regarding the readiness of the social democrats to entertain a coalition at the national level. This is demonstrated in another respect. For the elections in Salzburg, the leading candidate of the SPÖ, Gabriele Burgstaller, fought on a programme that only slightly differed from the Freedom Party, and in similar demagogic manner criticised “sclerotic structures in an out-dated welfare state” and also called for more privatisation.

Burgstaller is affiliated with the right wing of the SPÖ. As the daughter of a farmer from Upper Austria, her career did not follow the usual course of a passage through the party and trade unions. In 1994, she entered the party as a maverick sponsored by a number of trade union functionaries. Two years ago, she was a source of public interest when she argued for a national coalition with the FP and favoured collaboration with the right-wing finance minister, Karl-Heinz Grassler.

SPÖ leader Alfred Gusenbauer, who until now has favoured links with the Green Party, no longer excludes the possibility of a coalition with Haider in Vienna. As a democrat, he stated one should not automatically exclude other elected parties from participation in government. Already last autumn, Gusenbauer drew attention when he invited Jörg Haider to a meal of asparagus following election results that saw heavy

defeats for the FP.

The readiness of the social democrats to unite with Haider is also bound up with the economic and political changes that have been precipitated by the forthcoming eastward expansion of the European Union. Four of the 10 candidate countries that will be admitted to membership on May 1 share borders with Austria—Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. Increasingly porous borders to these countries will lead to a major shakeup of the social fabric in Austria. Many Austrian companies are already using cheap labour from neighbouring east European countries as a lever to put considerable pressure on wages and social standards inside Austria itself. Wage levels in the bordering eastern European nations are considerably lower than wage rates in Austria.

Small companies, handwork concerns, farmers and various types of self-employed businesses are fearful of a ruinous competition resulting from cheaply priced products and threats to existing social conditions.

A coalition government consisting of the SPÖ and FP will operate on one level to divert growing fears into xenophobia and nationalism, with the social democrats collaborating with the trade unions to keep workers under control.

This demonstrates the European dimension of the decision made in Carinthia. Four years ago, when Haider’s FP first joined the governing coalition in Vienna, the social democrats, who held power in a number of European countries, organised a political boycott of Haider’s party, which at the time was both ineffective and hypocritical. That the social democrats have now undertaken a coalition with this extreme-right-wing party is the clearest indication of the general lurch to the right in official bourgeois politics in Europe.



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