

European elections: debacle for the German SPD

Peter Schwarz
22 June 2004

Terms like “dramatic losses” and “devastating defeat” are now prevalent in commentaries describing election results for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Since it entered the federal government six years ago in alliance with the Greens, the party has lost one state election after another, as well as numerous local elections.

The SPD’s narrow success in the 2002 *Bundestag* (federal parliament) elections was the exception that confirms the rule. That result was largely attributable to the fact that the SPD rejected the Iraq war, in contrast to the Christian Democrats (Christian Democratic Union [CDU] and Christian Social Union [CSU]). Only four months later, the SPD continued its tailspin when the state legislatures of Hesse and Lower Saxony fell to the CDU.

But even in light of this unparalleled decline, the SPD’s result in the June 13 European elections is of a qualitatively different character. Never before since the establishment of the German Federal Republic after World War II has the SPD achieved such a poor result in a nationwide poll.

With 21.4 percent of the vote, it finished far behind its previous low of 28.8 percent in the 1953 *Bundestag* election. Moreover, given that a majority did not even bother to vote—the 57 percent abstention rate was another new record—the total percent of the electorate that cast a ballot for the SPD was 9 percent.

The debacle becomes even clearer if one looks at the absolute numbers of votes cast. Compared with the 2002 *Bundestag* election, the SPD lost 13 million, or more than two thirds of its votes. It received just 5.5 million votes, as compared to the 18.5 million it received in 2002. The CDU and CSU were not hit as badly by the low turnout. Despite losing 7 million votes, the two parties increased their combined share by 6 percent.

Compared with the last European elections five years ago, which also saw a low turnout and a poor result for the SPD, the Social Democrats lost 2.8 million votes. In comparison with the 1999 European election, the CDU-CSU lost 1.7 million votes, or 4 percent. But their 44.5 percent share in this month’s election, together with the 6.1 percent polled by the liberal “free market” Free Democratic Party (FDP), would ensure a clear majority in a *Bundestag* election.

The reason for the decline of the SPD, which is losing both voters and members in great numbers, has been known for a long time—the deep anger and discontent with the federal government’s so-called “reform” policies. The government’s “Agenda 2010” is generating mass opposition. This plan to gut the welfare state has

had a devastating effect on the lives of millions of former SPD voters.

The amalgamation of statutory unemployment benefits with welfare payments has hit 4.5 million people. Many have lost any sort of assistance. They are now forced to claim welfare and use up savings they had put away for their old age or ask their relatives for help.

The degree to which these cuts intrude into the most intimate areas of life was recently made clear in a report by the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. According to the magazine, coffins are piling up in crematoria cold-storage facilities because the abolition of death benefits, as part of the government’s health “reforms,” means that many people cannot afford to pay to bury their relatives. At the same time, the welfare office is delaying payment of burial costs for months.

Opposition to the SPD was predominantly expressed in the high number of abstentions. According to one study, some 11 million voters who had supported the SPD in the *Bundestag* election stayed at home in the European election.

The Greens in western Germany and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in the east were able to profit from the losses of the SPD. The FDP also substantially added to its vote at the European election, but in comparison with the *Bundestag* election of 2002 its vote declined, not only in absolute terms but also proportionately—from 7.4 to 6.1 percent.

In the former East Germany, the PDS vote was higher than the SPD’s, which emerged as the third-strongest party. With a 30.8 percent share in Brandenburg, the PDS even topped the CDU, which governs the state in a coalition with the SPD. The 27 percent turnout in this state was the lowest nationwide.

The PDS campaigned with a call for “social justice.” The fact that it is carrying out welfare cuts as a coalition party in state legislatures in Berlin and Mecklenburg Pomerania was obviously less significant to many voters than discontent with the federal government. In the former West Germany, the PDS found little resonance, winning only 1.7 percent of the vote.

Here, the Greens finished in second place in many large cities—in front of the SPD and behind the CDU-CSU. This was the case in Munich (23.3 percent), Frankfurt am Main (25 percent), Berlin (22.7 percent), Cologne, Bonn and Aachen. Altogether, the Greens won 11.9 percent of the vote. This was their best-ever result in a nationwide poll. However, in absolute terms, with 3.1 million votes, they clearly fell below their previous *Bundestag* result,

when they polled 4.1 million votes.

On first view, it appears paradoxical that the Greens profited from the decline of the SPD, since they have sat in the federal government with the SPD for six years and have called for swingeing welfare cuts. The reason is that they rest on a different social milieu. Their strongholds lie in the cities in which many students, academics, civil servants and public employees live. These somewhat better-off layers are more receptive to propaganda that describes the “reforms” as a necessary “modernisation” of the economic and social system.

In parallel with the European elections, there was a ballot for the legislature in the east German state of Thuringia. The result of this poll makes clear that the SPD’s losses cannot simply be ascribed to the vagaries of the European elections. With 14.5 percent, the SPD recorded the second-worst result in a federal poll in its history, and this was in the state where the SPD was founded in the nineteenth century. The cities of Erfurt and Gotha, which gave their names to two early SPD programmes, both lie in Thuringia.

With a turnout of 54 percent in the state election, the SPD lost three quarters of its vote compared to the last *Bundestag* election, where participation was 75 percent. Instead of 579,000, only 147,000 voted for the Social Democrats in Thuringia.

The PDS benefited from the decline of the SPD. It won a 26.1 percent share, its best election in a federal poll. The CDU improved its share slightly compared to the last *Bundestag* election (in which it fared very badly), but compared to the last state election it lost 8 percent of its vote. Only because the FDP and the Greens failed to reach the 5 percent hurdle was the CDU able to maintain its absolute majority in the state parliament.

The SPD reacted to the election debacle with exhortations to persevere. Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder categorically rejected making any change in course. “We must continue these policies because they are objectively necessary,” he said. “Therefore, I cannot advocate another policy.”

Party Chairman Franz Müntefering also rejected any fundamental correction to the party’s “reform” course. “I believe that we simply need time,” he explained. German citizens had “not yet registered” the successes the reforms offered, as, for instance, in the health service.

Nobody in the SPD presidium called for an alternative government policy. The so-called party lefts merely called for more discipline. The former Young Socialists chairman, Andrea Nahles, told the press that too many ministers were worried only about their department’s affairs and not about the standing of the SPD. According to these spokesmen, there is no better chancellor than Schröder, but if the “team play” does not improve in the SPD, there will be an “uproar” in the party.

Schröder also received support from the media and from the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI).

In an editorial in the political weekly *Die Zeit*, Michael Naumann demanded the SPD and the chancellor “sail against the storm.” Addressing a government to which he had previously belonged, Naumann said, “If they abandoned the reform course, they would be completely lost.” He went on to say that “Schröder’s chance of political survival” lies in his ability to get “the population to accept years of going without.”

Employers’ president Michael Rogowski assured the chancellor: “We are relying on you.” At the annual BDI convention, which took place two days after the elections, he praised the government, saying its Agenda 2010 was a reform package the likes of which “have not been seen in the Federal Republic for a long time.” What was crucial was that the SPD-Green government kept on course. “Even if it hurts, persevere, push on,” he told the chancellor, who was present at the meeting. “To stop would mean failure, and we do not wish him that.”

Even a dramatist of the rank of Brecht could not portray the political conditions in Germany more descriptively than the spectacle of such scenes. Millions of voters and hundreds of thousands of members are turning their backs on the SPD because they reject its politics. But the SPD answers by declaring it will “carry on regardless!” In this it is supported by the entire ruling establishment, including the boss of the largest business association, who assures Schröder, “We are relying on you.”

The profound gulf that has opened up between the mass of the population and official politics could not be clearer.

Die Zeit recognises that more is involved than the future of the SPD-led federal government, which could fall after the state election due in North-Rhine Westphalia in May 2005, or, at the latest, after the *Bundestag* election in the autumn of 2006. The high abstention rate, Naumann writes, represents “a creeping crisis of legitimacy in the Federal Republic.” This crisis of legitimacy rests “on the impression of voters that ‘politics’ is responsible for the fact that the welfare state of the past no longer exists.” Society’s fears for the risks involved in the future mean that “the country is becoming ungovernable, with growing voter discontent that would also affect a CDU-CSU-led government.”

If one overlooks Naumann’s arrogant tone—writing as one of the well-paid and materially secure editorialists of *Die Zeit*, made up for the most part of ex-ministers and ex-managers—he is saying that the voters’ refusal to accept social devastation means the country is “becoming ungovernable.” He leaves no doubt that he deems it the duty of every government to keep to the present course.

This declaration of war on the general population confronts the working class with the task of turning to a genuinely socialist and revolutionary political perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact