

Lessons of the European elections

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party-Germany)

1 July 2004

The June 13 European elections delivered an unmistakable message: the overwhelming majority of the European population sharply rejects the course being followed by the European Union and European governments. The election result was a plebiscite against the free-market economic policies, welfare cuts and militarism that constitute the political agenda of official Europe.

On the one hand, this could be seen from the high abstention level, which at 56 percent reached a historical peak, and on the other hand, by the fact that many voters used the ballot to punish incumbent governments. The Labour Party of Tony Blair, the Social Democratic Party of Gerhard Schröder, the UMP of Jacques Chirac and Jean Pierre Raffarin, Forza Italia of Silvio Berlusconi and the post-Stalinist government parties in Poland all suffered devastating blows.

Although in a few cases, right-wing chauvinist parties were able to profit from these defeats, as a whole the election was anything but a shift to the right. All the analyses agreed that the election results were characterised by substantial opposition to so-called social reforms and—particularly in the cases of England and Italy—against the participation in the Iraq war. In Spain, where three months earlier the conservative government had been voted out because of its support for the war, voters confirmed the surprise result of that parliamentary election.

One year ago, in a widely publicised statement supported by a considerable number of intellectuals, the German state philosopher Juergen Habermas had announced that February 15, 2003, “would go down in the history books as signal for the birth of a European public sphere.” On this day, in the capitals of Europe, millions had demonstrated against the Iraq war.

Habermas regarded these demonstrations as support for the European Union. Europe, he said, had “in the second half of the twentieth century found exemplary solutions for two problems.” The EU already offered “a form of ‘governing above and beyond the national state,’ which could serve as a role model in the post-national constellation,” and “the European welfare system” represented a standard that “even a future policy for a limited taming of capitalism” should not fall below.

June 13, 2004, has refuted the standpoint of Habermas. Using his own words, it showed that “the birth of a European public opinion” is taking place not in accord with the EU but in a rebellion against it. The defence of the “European welfare system” and opposition to militarism and war are expressed in the form of an overwhelming rejection of European governments and the authorities in Brussels.

The election result revealed the profound gulf that separates official European politics from the mass of the population.

None of the parties that dominate the European parliament and the national legislatures has a social base of any significance. The so-called “people’s parties” are merely skeletons comprising careerists and bureaucrats. They represent the interests of a narrow economic elite, whose fortunes, incomes and standard of living soar above that of the rest of the population. Their policies hardly differ from each other, whether they call themselves socialists, social democrats, greens, liberals or conservatives.

Without exception, they reacted to the election result by shifting further

to the right. The election losers Schröder, Blair and Raffarin stated categorically that they would make no concession to the voters and would stick to their course. Where opposition parties emerged strengthened from the election—as in Poland, Germany and Britain—they insisted that they would continue on the same course at even greater speed.

The far-right parties, which in some countries used social demagoguery to exploit discontent with the EU for their own benefit, play the role of moving the entire political spectrum further to the right.

Behind them stand influential sections of the ruling elite and, not infrequently, super-rich individuals. As a rule, because they are incapable of fulfilling the social expectations of their voters, they prove extremely instable. For example, the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands rapidly broke apart after its surprise success in 2002, and in Austria, Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party has lost three quarters of its votes since the last European election. However, both parties succeeded in making xenophobia and law-and-order politics acceptable, linked with sharp attacks on the welfare state. Establishment parties have to a large extent adopted the programmes of these extreme-right organisations.

The same role is played by the UK Independence Party in Britain, the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, the National Front in France and the ultra-nationalist parties in Poland, which all won considerable votes in the European elections. Their success is an expression of the advanced political decay of society, in light of the failure of the official workers’ organisations. It shows the dangers the working class confronts if it fails to seize the political initiative.

The deep gulf that has opened up between official politics and the mass of the population means that Europe is moving towards violent class battles. Such struggles are completely inevitable, in view of the sharp social contradictions.

Since the Second World War, the ruling elite has cushioned or avoided open class confrontations by means of social concessions and through the reformist organisations. If a conservative government failed because of resistance to its policies, then social democracy jumped in to fill the gap, or vice versa, without bringing the whole political system into question. In Eastern Europe, the ruling bureaucracy suppressed every independent political movement of the working class.

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes, the decline of social democracy and the loss of authority by parliamentary institutions and parties, which reached a new high point in the European election, means these mechanisms are increasingly ineffective. Bourgeois rule is in a deep crisis.

Somewhat more farsighted observers have recognised this. Thus, the newsweekly *Die Zeit* regards the election debacle of Germany’s ruling social democrats not merely as a crisis of the SPD, but also as a “creeping crisis of legitimacy for the Federal Republic.” Voter discontent would also be directed at a Christian Democrat-led government, according to the paper. The country could become “ungovernable.”

The bourgeoisie is preparing for such a crisis by systematically building up the state apparatus. Despite increasing intra-European tensions, the dismantling of democratic rights and the development of transnational police-state structures continue apace in the EU. In the name of immigration control, instruments of mass observation are being developed

that put Orwell's *1984* to shame; and in the name of the "fight against terrorism," elementary democratic rights are being annulled. The attacks directed mainly against foreigners and alleged terrorists today can, when required, be used to suppress oppositional tendencies tomorrow.

The working class must prepare for inevitable class confrontations by liberating themselves from the paralysing influence of the reformist organisations and by breaking from social democracy not only organisationally, but also politically. It is not enough to simply reject the establishment parties and punish them at the ballot box. The working class must draw the lessons of the decline of social reformism and turn to an international socialist perspective. Only in this way can it intervene in social developments as an independent political force.

This was the basis for the election participation of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG), as the German section of the Fourth International, alongside its British sister organisation, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The PSG obtained its best-ever result in the European election. The party's national slate received 25,824 votes. In arithmetical terms, this may not appear to be very much. But the future development of Europe will not be decided by the allocation of seats in the European parliament; it depends upon the self-confident political actions of the working population. And from this point of view—the political development of the working class—the increased vote for the PSG is significant.

At the centre of the PSG election programme is the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe.

"The overcoming of European borders and the joint application of the enormous technical and cultural resources and material riches of the continent would create the preconditions for overcoming poverty and backwardness in a short period, enabling a rise in living standards throughout Europe," as the PSG election manifesto states. "This remains impossible, however, as long as the process of unification is determined by the profit interests of big business.... A progressive unification of Europe is only possible in the form of the United Socialist States of Europe. This presupposes the political unification of the European working class."

This perspective will assume great significance in the coming political developments. It is only on this basis that the widespread opposition to the European governments and their antisocial and undemocratic policies, which were clearly expressed in these elections, can be developed in a progressive direction.

The unification of the European working class on a socialist basis means more than holding joint demonstrations and exercising international solidarity in labour disputes—as important as this is. It is a political orientation that rests upon the lessons and experiences of the past century—a century that was marked not only by great class battles and revolutions, but also by major defeats and tragedies.

The historical problem of Europe consists of the fact that its highly developed productive forces are incompatible with the constraints imposed by a system that divides the continent into competing national states. It is impossible to resolve this problem progressively and unite Europe on the basis of capitalist relations. This was the reason for two world wars. Both arose from the attempts of German imperialism to overcome this division through force, by subjecting Europe to its supremacy. On both occasions, these attempts ended in disaster.

After the Second World War, it appeared that this historic problem had been overcome. In the final analysis, the process of integration towards the European Union, the peaceful relations between the European powers and their ability to cushion the class struggle by means of social concessions were based on collaboration with America, which used its enormous economic resources to pacify Europe. This again was due to the common policy of confrontation with the Soviet Union. In the Cold War, Western Europe was indispensable as a strategic bulwark for the US.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the contradictions between the

imperialist powers have once again come to the fore. The first Iraq war, the war against Yugoslavia and now the second Iraq war in turn clearly demonstrate the long-term irreconcilability of the economic and strategic interests of American and European imperialism.

Tensions with the US are also bringing contradictions within Europe to the surface. The attempt by American imperialism to defend its worldwide supremacy through the military subjugation of Iraq has upset the foundations of Europe's internal equilibrium, as the conflicts over the Iraq war and the European constitution reveal.

Increasingly, the so-called "process of European integration" revolves around the question, which great power or group of capitalists holds sway within the EU? The European election also accelerated this development. The general move to the right with which the establishment parties have reacted to the election results further encourages nationalist and chauvinist tendencies.

In the end, the globalisation of production has undermined the policy of social compromise. Whereas previously, some limited balancing of social and regional differences was possible within the framework of the EU, the European Commission in Brussels has now become synonymous with deregulation, liberalisation and the dismantling of workers' rights.

These fundamental international changes make it impossible to return to the reformist politics of the post-war period. Those who today claim that the 1970s prove that "a policy of social reforms is feasible" are pulling the wool over the eyes of working people. The objective contradictions of the capitalist system have proven more powerful than all reformist agreements. Proposals to revive the SPD of post-war chancellor Willy Brandt are no better or more realistic than the nostrum of reviving the Stalinist German Democratic Republic. The working class cannot allow itself to be confused by such retrogressive standpoints.

Working people can only defend their social and democratic rights by uniting across national borders and reorganising Europe's economy along socialist lines. Only the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe can provide a clear orientation to the mounting resistance against the EU and European governments. Only on this basis can the antisocial and irresponsible policy of the European elite be stopped and a society created that places the interests of the population above the profit motives of the employers.



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