

German state elections: far-right NPD enters parliament in Saxony

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Fifteen years after the collapse of Stalinist East Germany, the neo-fascist NPD (German National Party) has entered the state parliament in Saxony, with a total of twelve deputies. This is the alarming result of state elections held in Germany September 19.

For the first time since 1968, the NPD, which openly propagates racist and extreme nationalist positions, has won representation in a state parliament.

Electoral support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) slumped to less than ten percent of the vote for the first time in the party's history. In Saxony, the SPD will have just one more deputy than the extreme-right NPD.

The protracted decline of the SPD was also reflected in the election in the eastern state of Brandenburg, which includes the German capital of Berlin. The SPD has played the leading role in the state and has held the post of prime minister since German reunification in 1990. On September 19, however, the party's share of the vote fell by 7 percent. The SPD still finished in first place, but with a reduced total of 32 percent.

Up until these state elections, Germany's main opposition party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had been able to profit from the slump in support for the SPD. This time, however, the CDU suffered a substantial setback and emerged as the principal loser. In Saxony, where the CDU had governed with an absolute majority, the party lost 15.8 percent. In Brandenburg, the CDU suffered the same percentage loss as the SPD—7 percent—and finished third behind the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—the successor party to the Stalinist ruling party in the former East Germany).

Germany's two main "people's parties," which in the past could count on winning, between them, 70 or 80 percent of the vote, were able to win just 50 percent in last Sunday's poll. Taking into account the low voter turnout—56 percent in Brandenburg and 59 percent in Saxony—only a quarter of the electorate voted for the two parties that have dominated political life in post-war Germany.

The elections demonstrated that the gulf between the population as a whole and the political establishment is continuing to deepen.

Other parties also profited from the decline in support for both the SPD and CDU. In both states, the PDS emerged as the second strongest party, while the Green Party and the "free market" Free Democratic Party (FDP) also increased their vote. The latter two parties did not, however, receive the five percent necessary to secure parliamentary representation.

Despite the substantial fall in votes for the SPD and CDU (14 percent combined), it is likely that the political composition of the parliament in Brandenburg will remain unchanged. The PDS won an additional five percent, and with 28 percent of the vote recorded its best-ever total in a state election. However, the SPD and CDU together still have a clear majority, and will probably continue to administer the state in a coalition government for the third time in a row since 1990.

The fourth party with representation in Brandenburg is the extreme-right German People's Union (DVU), which already had parliamentary

representation. The DVU increased its vote by only 0.8 percent.

The political shift took a more spectacular form in Saxony, a state lying in the southeast of Germany and sharing borders with Poland and the Czech Republic. Three parties entered the state parliament for the first time—the Greens, the FDP and the NPD. The PDS also won its biggest-ever vote in the state, with 23.6 percent, but this represented only a small increase over its result in the previous state election.

The number of parties and spectrum of political standpoints represented in the new state parliament led some commentators to warn of the danger of "Weimar conditions." (The reference is to the unstable Weimar Republic that arose in the aftermath of World War I and ultimately gave way to the fascist dictatorship of Hitler's Nazi Party).

The loss suffered by the CDU in Saxony means that the party will be unable to govern with the support of its preferred coalition partner—the FDP. It is widely expected that the new state government will take the form of a coalition between the CDU and the SPD.

The most important change in Saxony is the entry of the NPD into the state parliament. While the DVU is regarded as little more than a propaganda machine for the interests of Munich-based publisher and millionaire Gerhard Frey, who personally funds his organisation's ambitious propaganda and election campaigns, the NPD has established a certain base in Saxony among groups of skinhead thugs, and has built up an organisational structure within the milieu of Germany's extreme right.

For decades, the party has placed itself in the tradition of Nazi politics and embedded itself within violent, extreme-right circles. The leading candidate for the NPD in Saxony, Holger Apfel, is owner of the far-right newspaper *Deutsche Stimme* (*German Voice*). He is currently under investigation by the state attorney's office in Dresden for public incitement and the distribution of National Socialist propaganda, including banned Nazi rock CDs.

At election rallies Apfel, who has held a seat in the Dresden city parliament since local elections last June, made no secret of his fascist sympathies. Not only has he stirred up hatred against "foreigners, gays and pot smokers," he has also resorted to threats, declaring: "We will not be content until German re-education sites, such as the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, have been levelled to the ground."

Under conditions where all of the main parties in Germany support the dismantling of the welfare state, Apfel was able to claim that his party was the "last opposition" in the state, embodying the "organised will of Germans against heterodoxy, domination by foreigners, globalisation and capitalist exploitation."

The NPD was able to win support mainly in deprived rural areas adjoining the Czech Republic, where unemployment often exceeds 25 percent. The region known as Swiss Saxony to the east of Dresden is regarded as a stronghold of the neo-Nazis. In the constituency Swiss Saxony 2, the NPD won 15.1 percent of the vote, and in the regional centre of Annaberg in Erzgebirge, a total of 14 percent cast their votes for the party.

According to a study undertaken by the research group Wahlen, support for the NPD among young people and the unemployed (18 percent) was nearly twice as high as the state average. Among young men between 18 and 29, the NPD was able to win 21 percent of the votes cast.

Many commentaries characterised the increase in support for the NPD as a reaction, in the form of protest votes, to the government's Hartz IV measures, which are aimed at slashing social benefits. This is no doubt the case.

The package of social and welfare cuts recently introduced by the SPD-Green Party federal coalition government means a worsening of living conditions for many workers and youth who have for years lacked regular employment, and have been sent from one retraining course or short-term job to another. The Hartz IV measures have made patently clear that no one can expect this situation to improve. Fifteen years after the reunification of Germany, Hartz IV has effectively put an end to all promises of a better future.

This is the message that has been repeated in recent weeks by leading political figures. This includes, for example, the declaration by German President Horst Köhler that it was necessary to accept the principle of inequality.

SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, for his part, accused the German population, just two days before the state elections, of having a "benefits mentality." The weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* echoed this theme, headlining its latest edition "Eastern Vale of Tears," and complaining that many "East Germans hanker after the comforts of the GDR [the former East Germany] and have not gotten used to taking their own initiative."

The claim that many voters used Sunday's elections as an opportunity to register a protest against welfare cuts and the attacks being carried out by the government does not explain, however, why an extreme right-wing, xenophobic and nationalist party was able to win support from a significant part of the electorate.

The explanation for this lies in the experiences of recent years—above all, the betrayal of the working class by the SPD and the trade unions—and the fact that the political lessons of German reunification and the ensuing process of social decline remain to be drawn. While illusions regarding the prospect of a rosy future under capitalism have been shattered, the political significance of the events of 1990 have not yet been grasped by wide layers of the population.

This has, up to this point, paralysed the working class and rendered it incapable of intervening in events as an independent political force. In the final analysis, the support gained by the NPD from layers of the unemployed and young people is an expression of the disorientation of the working class.

At the time of German reunification, there was a widespread belief—propagated by the political establishment and the media—that the collapse of the GDR [East Germany] signified the failure of socialism. The reintroduction of capitalism within the framework of reunification appeared to many to represent a more promising alternative than the defence of the social achievements, however limited, left over from the GDR.

Within this context, it was relatively easy for the capitalist ruling class in the West and its collaborators within the Stalinist bureaucracy in the East to divert pro-democracy demonstrations that broke out in the autumn of 1989 against the East German Stalinist regime along German nationalist and reformist channels.

This rapidly became clear in Saxony itself. At the Monday protest demonstrations held in Leipzig in 1989, flags of the Federal Republic [the former West Germany] began to appear, and the original slogan of the demonstrators, "We are the People," gave way to "We are One People." Leipzig and Dresden were also the cities where former West German chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) made speeches about "flourishing landscapes," and pledged that no one would suffer a worsening of living

conditions under a reunified (capitalist) Germany.

In reality, the collapse of the GDR revealed not the failure of socialism, which the Stalinist regime in East Germany never embodied, but rather the failure of the entire Stalinist perspective of "socialism in one country." The breakdown of the GDR system made clear that under conditions of globalisation, it was impossible to defend social gains on a nationalist basis, whether this took the form of the anti-internationalist and anti-revolutionary Stalinist program, or the social democratic standpoint of a "socially orientated market economy."

The collapse of the GDR was a vindication, in the negative, of the Marxist standpoint that a socialist perspective can be realised only on the basis of an international program that proceeds from the unification of workers worldwide.

Following reunification, the population of East Germany jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Instead of prosperity, it suffered mass unemployment; instead of "flourishing landscapes," it experienced flourishing weeds where factories formerly stood. At the same time, the west of the country was hit by one round of welfare cuts after another, along with a growing assault on wages, jobs and living standards.

A fundamental truth revealed by these bitter experiences is that the overriding division in Germany is not between east and west, but rather between the capitalist class and the working class.

The recent eastward expansion of the European Union has only compounded the social crisis. Major corporations, which formerly extolled the system of so-called "social partnership"—Siemens, Daimler, Volkswagen—have taken to blackmailing workers with threats to shift production abroad, in order to impose wage cuts. A number of states in the east, including Saxony and Brandenburg, share borders with regions of Eastern Europe where, only a few kilometres away, wage rates are a fraction of the German average.

None of the main bourgeois parties has any solution for these problems, which were not even addressed in the state election campaigns. Instead, politicians preached the necessity of "individual initiative" and raged against a "benefits mentality."

Under these conditions, the NPD was able to exploit widespread fears of social decline and divert them into racist and nationalist channels. At first glance, it seems incomprehensible that a xenophobic party should be able to win support in regions where foreigners are barely to be found. But the proximity to the Czech and Polish borders, where wage rates are substantially lower, exercises a powerful pressure and is seen as a threat.

The NPD was also able to base itself on the work already carried out in Saxony by the ruling CDU administration, which propagated nationalism and anti-communism. Ten years ago, the campaign for the German presidency of a former justice minister in Saxony, Steffen Heitmann (CDU), collapsed when the full extent of his thoroughly right-wing and chauvinist views emerged.

The PDS bears a central responsibility for the growth in influence of the right wing. While the established political parties attack the PDS for criticising the Hartz IV measures, the PDS' opposition to social cuts is hypocritical and demagogic to the core. It is a well-known fact that in those regions where the PDS participates in government, it has supported measures aimed at undermining social and welfare gains.

The party, which has its roots in the former Stalinist governing party of East Germany, has played a key political role since reunification in preventing any independent political initiative by the working class. In his memoirs, the last prime minister of the GDR, Hans Modrow, wrote that his main concern was to "ensure the country remained governable and avoided chaos."

In his opinion, the road to reunification was "absolutely necessary" and had to be undertaken "with determination." At the same time, PDS leader Gregor Gysi, echoing the SPD, declared the issue was "to what extent it was possible to organise capitalism in Germany in a humane, socially just

and democratic manner.”

The PDS has continued to play the same role up to the present. While it talks about resistance and social justice, in practice it collaborates in carrying out brutal attacks on the social fabric in those regions where it shares power.

In the wake of the increased vote for the NPD in Saxony, the PDS has joined with the SPD and CDU to plead for the “unity of all democrats.” In fact, such unity is aimed subordinating the working class, east and west, to the bourgeoisie, and forcing through the government’s programme to dismantle the welfare state. Such “unity” only serves to exacerbate the process of social decay upon which the NPD feeds.

It is necessary to draw a political balance sheet from the state elections. Fifteen years after reunification, illusions of social justice under capitalism have been finally exposed. Working people confront the task of organising themselves as an independent political force on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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