

# Germany: Who is responsible for the increased vote for the extreme right?

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In addition to an extremely low turnout (55 percent) and a dramatic loss in votes for the Social Democratic Party (down 13.6 percent), the state election in the Saarland on September 5 also produced another result: a clear increase in votes for the extreme right-wing German National Party (NPD). The NPD, which never previously stood candidates in the Saarland, garnered 4 percent of the vote and only narrowly missed the 5 percent hurdle that would have enabled it to send deputies to the state legislature.

The far right is expected to win even more votes in the coming state elections in Saxony and Brandenburg. The NPD is standing candidates in Saxony; in Brandenburg, the extreme right German Peoples Union (DVU) is standing candidates.

In Saarbruecken, the state capital of the Saarland, accusations had already begun to fly on the evening of the election. Analysts pointed out that the gains for the right wing came predominantly from protest voters and that the NPD had received an above average number of votes from the unemployed and those hit by the national Social Democratic-Green Party government's "Hartz IV" social cuts programme. Some media commentators even claimed that mass protests against Hartz IV had strengthened the NPD.

The next morning, Peter Mueller (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), re-elected as state premier, claimed that former Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman Oskar Lafontaine's criticisms of the labour market reforms had played into the hands of the NPD. If, like Lafontaine, one fights against Hartz IV with populism, Mueller insisted, the inevitable result is to drive voters into the arms of the far right.

The SPD executive committee eagerly adopted this line, repeating it in numerous interviews, until last Thursday the pro-SPD political weekly *Die Zeit*

advanced a new argument. Under the headline "Rebellion of the Disreputable," *Die Zeit*'s editor Matthias Geis linked Lafontaine with the leaders of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the successor party to the Stalinist state party of the former East Germany) and the far right, writing "Bisky, Gysi, Lafontaine and the right are encouraging the fears from which they profit." He maintained that there was an "anti-Hartz front" stretching from Lafontaine and the PDS to the NPD and DVU.

This argument is meant to intimidate all critics and opponents of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's anti-social policies, labelling them as allies of the extreme right wing. This is false and cynical.

One does not have to agree with Lafontaine's political conceptions to reject the claim that he or other critics of the Hartz laws are responsible for the gain in votes by the far right. Such a conclusion is absurd. In reality, the opposite is the case. Since none of the major parties takes the concerns and fears of the population seriously—instead seizing every opportunity to say there is no alternative to Hartz IV—the right-wing extremists are able to exploit such social questions. It is the anti-social policies of the SPD-Green Party government in Berlin that is forcing increasing numbers into poverty and misery and is creating fertile ground for right-wing demagogues—not those who attack and criticize those policies.

At present, the extreme right is garnering mainly protest votes. Unlike the 1930s, there are no organized, far-right or fascist gangs controlling the streets. The vast majority of those demonstrating against Hartz IV reject the extreme right. The protestors are mainly ordinary people—often entire families—who are concerned about the future of society and angry over drastic social cuts being carried out at the same time

big business and the wealthy are granted massive tax breaks. The central demand on the demonstrations of recent weeks has been “Social justice!”

These demonstrations have continued throughout Germany for weeks, and have put the government under increasing pressure. For its part, the government is looking for ways of suppressing the resistance, and has seized upon the gain in votes for the extreme right.

Even before the elections in the Saarland, it was claimed that the extreme right had infiltrated the protests and was now a motivating force behind them. Small groups of right-wing extremist demonstrators are given disproportionately prominent media coverage, although they are usually found on the fringes of the demonstrations, having being rejected by the mass of those participating.

If, as expected, the far right gain votes in Saxony and Brandenburg, the media campaign will intensify. This serves to further discredit and intimidate all those participating in the demonstrations and criticising the government. At the same time, the slogan of “unity against the far right” serves to strengthen the alliance that is pushing through the Hartz “reforms” against the resistance of the general population. This alliance comprises all the major parties, the employers’ associations, the media and the churches and, with some reservations, the trade unions.

It would not be the first time that the slogan “For the unity of all democrats against the far right” was employed to obscure a reactionary policy that, in fact, plays into the hands of the most extreme right-wing political forces. Ten years ago, the SPD and the Greens supported the campaign “rebellion of the respectable,” instigated by the previous CDU-led government of Helmut Kohl. At that time, Kohl’s anti-immigrant policies had encouraged right-wing gangs to carry out deadly attacks on foreigners.

When several asylum-seeker hostels went up in flames, the government called for an “alliance of all democrats” and candlelight demonstrations were organised. The result of this “unity against the far right” was the SPD’s agreement to largely abolish the right of asylum contained in the German constitution. Since then, immigrants’ rights have been systematically curtailed and thousands of asylum seekers and refugees have been deported.

It should be recalled that two years ago, an attempt to

ban the NPD failed when it was revealed that one in seven NPD party functionaries was an agent of the German intelligence agency. Several of the anti-Semitic and racist documents cited to justify the ban had been written by these agents. It also turned out that several agents either led or had established local and regional NPD federations.

The government’s attempt to exploit the gain in votes by the NPD is pure hypocrisy, aimed at pushing through its own reactionary political programme. The fight against far-right and fascist parties requires the political development and mobilization of the working class. The present demonstrations are a beginning. However, they lack a viable perspective. They show clearly the urgency for the construction of a new party based on an international perspective and a socialist programme.



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