

Czech Greens enter right-wing government

Markus Salzmann, Dietmar Henning
19 June 2006

Following the Czech parliamentary elections of June 2 and 3, the Green Party is now preparing to join the right-wing government of the arch-conservative Citizens Party (ODS).

The Greens have now entered an Eastern European parliament for the first time, with Strana Zelenych (SZ) receiving 6.3 percent of the vote. Clearly, the Green Party in Prague is beginning its political odyssey at the point it left off in Germany—as a governing party; but this time no longer in alliance with the Social Democrats, but instead with politically conservative and right-wing parties.

Czech voters brusquely rejected the last government—a coalition of the Social Democrats (CSSD), Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and the right-wing Liberal Union. The strongest party following the election was the ODS, under party chief Mirek Topolánek. With 35.4 percent of the vote, it enjoys a 3 percent lead over the CSSD of outgoing Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek. Its former coalition partners, the Liberal Union, received only 0.3 percent and face political oblivion.

The Stalinist Communist Party (KSCM), with 12.8 percent, and the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL), with 7.2 percent, have also won seats in the new parliament. Election turnout, at approximately 64 percent, was very low by European standards, but was higher than in the preceding elections.

The new parliament faces a political stalemate. The Social Democrats and Stalinists, on the one hand, and the Citizens Party, Christian Democrats and the Greens, on the other, each control about 100 of the 200 seats. This unstable situation makes new elections a possibility, according to many commentators.

For the time being, however, President Vaclav Klaus (ODS) has asked his party colleague Mirek Topolánek to form a new government. He feels able to take this step since the Greens are clearly desperate to get into bed with the right wing.

Prime Minister designate Topolánek and Green Party leader Martin Bursík both began their political careers when the former Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe began to crumble in the 1990s, as members of the Citizens Forum, which gathered together the so-called “democratic” opposition against the old regime. Their respective careers are characteristic of the development of these forces.

The 50-year-old Topolánek first became politically active in 1989 in the Citizens Forum. He belonged to those bourgeois forces who, under the guise of the so-called “Velvet

Revolution,” sought the restoration of capitalism and have since shown total disinterest in the social decline that subsequently took place.

After being active for a number of years in local government politics in his northern Moravian homeland, he joined the Citizens Party in 1994. At this time, the ODS was carrying out extensive attacks on wages and social conditions. In 1996, Topolánek entered the senate.

Despite a few conflicts and differences with Vaclav Klaus, Topolánek and Klaus both stand for the same reactionary policies. During the election campaign, the ODS put forward a right-wing, free-market economic programme. Alongside the fundamental reform of pensions and the health system, Topolánek’s main objective is the lowering of business taxes. He is seeking to introduce a standard tax rate of 15 percent (a “flat tax”) for businesses and private individuals. At the same time, the ODS wants to relax employees’ protection against dismissal and reduce social security contributions paid by employers.

In the election campaign, Topolánek combined his subservience to the financial elite with crude nationalist clichés, for example, calling the work on the planned European Union constitution “sh*t.” He also announced he would implement major changes in personnel in the state apparatus in a “night of the long knives,” a phrase usually employed to describe the Röhm Putsch in July 1934, when Hitler ordered the murder of a section of the SA leadership as part of a purge of the Nazi party.

In order to push through his right-wing government programme, Topolánek is seeking coalition partners and the Czech Greens have eagerly offered their services.

Their chairman, Martin Bursík, only joined the party in June 2004, gaining his leadership position in September last year. Before this, he had changed his party allegiance no less than four times. In November 1989, he was among the founders of the Citizens Forum in Prague. Then he became deputy chairman of the Citizens Movement, which emerged from the Citizens Forum, and then changed to the Liberal Democrats, for whom he sat in government in 1998 for a few months as environment minister. Afterwards, he changed to the Christian Democrats and then finally switched to the Greens.

Bursík is a typical representative of today’s Greens. As Germany’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* described him: “He

has nothing in common with the 'rank and file,' which is statistically irrelevant in the Czech Republic, and certainly does not share their personal lifestyle. Bursik has become wealthy through restitutions [the return of formerly expropriated property] and enjoys enough expensive hobbies to please the nouveaux riches among the upper middle class."

The Czech Greens were formed at the beginning of the 1990s on the initiative and in close cooperation with the German Greens. In 1991, the German Greens' Heinrich Böll Foundation established a branch in Prague, its first foreign representation. The Czech Greens were formed at about the same time.

The first director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation was Milan Horacek, a 59-year-old native Czech who had emigrated to Germany from Czechoslovakia after Moscow's suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. He was a founder member of the German Greens, and now represents the party in the European parliament.

After various jobs in industry, Horacek studied political science at Frankfurt University from 1976 to 1981, entering the first Green Party city council group and later joining the party's first bundestag (federal parliamentary) alongside Joschka Fischer, who later became foreign minister and deputy chancellor.

Horacek returned to live in Prague again in 1989-1990. His Czech citizenship, which was removed under the Stalinists, was reinstated by Vaclav Havel, the president at the time, who also took him onto his staff as an advisor. One year later he took over the leadership of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Shortly before the last elections, Vaclav Havel also publicly announced his support for the Greens.

Horacek, like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, his party colleague in the European parliament, and numerous other Green politicians in Germany and Austria, supported the Czech Greens in the election campaign. In a joint press statement with Cohn-Bendit, Horacek said, "We are very pleased about the election success of Strana Zelenych, which is a crucial breakthrough for all Greens in central and Eastern Europe and strengthens the Greens throughout Europe."

The Czech elections and the development of the Greens there illustrate a European and international phenomenon, i.e., the inexorable move to the right of this political current. Originally formed as a supposed alternative to the hated old parties, the Greens have become a central plank of the political establishment and do not shrink from supporting and sharing government responsibility with the most right-wing parties.

In a rapid turn of events the Czech Greens have transformed themselves from an ecological protest party with a verbal commitment to some social and democratic improvements into a right-wing bourgeois party. A metamorphosis which took the German Greens 20 years has been achieved by their party friends in Prague in just one electoral term.

Although the origins of the Czech Greens lay in the late

1980s and early 1990s, for a long time the party remained largely unknown. With ecology as literally their sole programmatic point they stumbled along, torn apart by internal party conflicts. In 2002, as the crisis of the bourgeois parties, above all the Social Democrats, became ever greater, the Greens tried to fill the political gap that was emerging.

The party began to recruit members and supporters from the narrow layer of the better-off. Suddenly, it was receiving broad support from the media and in the 2002 elections gained sufficient votes to qualify for state funding. Accordingly, the orientation of Strana Zelenych changed. Ecological questions receded into the background; pacifism and advocating civil rights and social improvements were thrown overboard. Following fierce trench warfare over the last year, a right-wing group around Martin Bursik finally took over the leadership of the party.

The Greens endorsed the programme of the ODS almost without reservation. They too demand a fundamental reform of the pension system, call for an increased individual contribution to pay for the health service, and are for the introduction of student fees. The Greens not only agree with the introduction of a flat tax, they also demand a kind of "eco-tax" that would further push up the price of electricity and gasoline, which have already risen dramatically in recent years.

The illusions harboured by their voters—who come mainly from among students and those voting for the first time—will rapidly evaporate. The Greens were only able to get into parliament at all because they could still present themselves as a force that brings a "breath of fresh air" into politics. In the Czech Republic, at least, they have never been in government before and therefore have not yet had an opportunity to show their true face and discredit themselves.

This is now changing. In Prague, the Greens are showing their true colours.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact