

Bremen: Massive opposition to the German government expressed in local election

Dietmar Henning**16 May 2007**

The state election in the north German city of Bremen on May 13 clearly revealed the extent of popular opposition to the federal government. Only a third of the eligible electorate voted in the city-state of Bremen for either of Germany's two main "people's parties"—the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—which govern in a grand coalition in Berlin. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted, the German "people's parties have become parties without people".

The SPD lost 5.5 percent of its total from four years ago and won just 36.8 percent of the vote. The CDU received 25.6 percent—4.1 percent less compared to the last elections in 2003. Voter turnout of less than 58 percent was also down compared to the last election. This means the absolute losses of both the SPD and CDU are far higher than the proportional figures. In absolute numbers the SPD lost over 17 percent of its vote, and the CDU over 18 percent, compared to four years ago.

The Green Party and the Left Party were able to profit from the growing opposition to the grand coalition of the SPD and CDU, which has ruled Bremen for the past twelve years. The Greens achieved their best ever result in a state election, with 16.4 percent. In 2003, the party received 12.8 percent in Bremen. This time the Green Party picked up an extra 8,000 votes to total 45,000.

There was also substantial electoral support for the Left Party, which received 8.4 percent. This was sufficient for the party to enter a West German state parliament for the first time. The vote represented an increase compared to the party's showing in Bremen in the federal elections held two years ago (5.5 percent), although the party lost 7,000 votes compared to its 2005 total. Four years ago the two parties currently fusing to form the Left Party (the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative—WASG) received just 1.7 percent in Bremen. The PDS and WASG agreed to an early fusion of their two organisations in preparation for this year's Bremen election. The federal wide fusion is due to be completed in the middle of June this year.

The free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) could increase its vote by only around 1.7 points, to 5.9 percent. The extreme right-wing German People's Union (DVU) received 5.4 percent and, due to an anomaly in the local electoral law, will be able to send a deputy into the state parliament.

The Bremen SPD now has the choice of resuming its coalition with the CDU or forming an alliance with the Greens. On the evening of the election result the re-elected Bremen mayor Jens Böhrnsen (SPD) announced that his party would "rapidly" form a

government and invited both parties for exploratory discussions. The federal chairman of the SPD Kurt Beck explained that the decision on a new government coalition rested in the hands of the regional organization in Bremen, but sections of the SPD have already indicated their preference for an alliance with the Greens.

Some newspapers are already speculating about the possibility of an early dissolution of the federal grand coalition. Commenting on the election result the *Hamburger Abendblatt* wrote, "From today competitive pressure by the Left Party will intensify scenarios of a departure from the grand coalition in Berlin amongst the lefts in the SPD."

The shift to the left expressed in the election led to hectic reactions and declarations of surprise by leading figures in the grand coalition. None of them had expected such a large vote for the Left Party. Speakers for the CDU called for a clear statement of intent from the SPD regarding the continuation of the grand coalition and, as he has done in the past, vice-chancellor Franz Müntefering (SPD) declared that the drop in support for his party in this local election would have no effect on the government's program and policies.

The Bremen election result is a consequence of government policies at a federal and state level aimed at combating economic problems by increasing social and welfare cuts, which have brought about rapid social decline. Bremen has undergone radical structural change during the past few years. Thousands of jobs have been slashed, particularly in shipbuilding and the steel industry. A number of large shipyards have closed, including Bremen Vulkan and AG Weser. The Bremen steel plant was taken over by the French Arcelor company (since 2006 known as Arcelor Mittal) with a substantial loss of jobs.

DaimlerChrysler is still the largest private employer in the city, but as is the case with the air and space industry in general (final assembly of the wings for Airbus takes place in Bremen), employment levels are constantly being cut.

As a result, rates for poverty and unemployment in the region have soared during past years. Recently, there has been a small reversal of this trend, but only because many of the affected have been bureaucratically excluded from statistics. In March 2007 there were 36,000 unemployed persons registered in Bremen (14,000 in adjoining Bremerhaven), a rate of 11.2 percent (13.3 percent Bremerhaven). At the same time, nearly 60,000 Bremen citizens subsist on miserly Hartz IV unemployment payments, while another 23,000 receive welfare payments. The suburbs

where such poverty prevails are slowing falling apart.

According to researchers, nearly 330,000 persons in Bremen lived under or in the proximity to the poverty line in 2005. Approximately half of these individuals were dependent on public support; the other half survived on low wage jobs or inadequate pensions. One in three children under 15 in Bremen lives in poverty. In Bremerhaven this figure is even higher, at 40 percent.

Together with the city's major companies, the grand coalition in Bremen, which has governed the city since 1995, bears full responsibility for this mass poverty. The Bremen government has continually argued that its first priority is dealing with the city's debt of 14 billion euros, which, it insists, can only be tackled through extensive social cuts.

The resulting social polarization has now made itself clearly felt in the election results. Poorer layers of the city's population stayed away from the ballot box and average turnout here varied between 40 and 50 percent. In one of the poorest electoral districts, turnout fell to just 38 percent. In the better-off residential districts, on the other hand, turnout averaged around 70 percent.

The SPD and CDU lost votes in all electoral districts, but the SPD also lost out in its former strongholds—older working class districts and the large housing estates. It was here in such former social-democratic centres where turnout was especially low. The CDU lost fewest votes in its strongholds—wealthier residential and rural areas.

Both of the main parties lost votes in the city centre and bordering districts which, according to polls, are home to those with "a pronounced educational background".

It was among such layers that the Greens were able to pick up votes. In the Bremen city centre and the edge of town the Greens received up to 40 percent of the vote, and in one district (Ostertor) even registered 50.3 percent. 21 percent of the self-employed in Bremen voted for the Greens, who emerged as the second choice for such layers, behind the CDU. The Greens also received 19 percent of the vote from clerical workers and civil servants and also won votes amongst younger voters. The Greens notched up the second highest tally (23 percent) amongst first time voters and those under 30.

The Left Party was also able to win support from middle class layers. In the above-mentioned electoral district of Ostertor, the Left Party won 19.8 percent—just two percent behind the SPD. The Left Party also picked up votes in working class districts, averaging approximately 10 percent while, according to research group data, 22 percent of the unemployed voted for the party.

While the parties of the grand coalition were punished by voters, the Greens and the Left Party were able to profit from the growing opposition of broad layers of the population. The election result is therefore a distorted expression of increasing social and political polarization. The fact is, however, that life for broad sections would be no better under an SPD-Green state government in Bremen than under the current grand coalition.

On the evening of the election the leading Green candidate, Karoline Linnert, declared it was necessary to rapidly tackle Bremen's debts of 14 billion euro in order to restore the city's viability. Her appeal was nothing less than a call for the implementation of further and intensified welfare cuts. Regardless

of the "left sounding" promises occasionally made by the Greens in its election campaign the, party has repeatedly made clear at a state and federal level that it fully accepts the framework of the capitalist profit system. The Green Party has vehemently supported social cuts.

The Left Party was also surprised by its result in Bremen. The party's local candidate, Peter Erlanson, was not the candidate favoured by the national leadership. Instead, the two leaders of the Left Party in the German parliament—Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi—proposed the party's speaker on finance policy, Axel Troost. Nevertheless, Erlanson was selected on the basis of support from WASG members in Bremen, the majority of whom backed the 48-year-old at a meeting in January of this year. Erlanson began his political activities in the anti-nuclear power movement and student politics, then shifted to the Attac movement and trade union politics, and is currently the deputy works council chairman at a Bremen clinic.

In his election campaign he had taken up the theme of growing poverty and promised solutions. At a state press conference following the election, the Left Party in Bremen promised initiatives for the first meeting of the new state parliament in June. The party said that forms of cheap wage labour (one-euro-jobs) would be turned into proper jobs with social insurance, that a moratorium would be enforced for the forcible eviction of the unemployed, and that a cheap transport ticket would be introduced. Erlanson is also opposed to plans by the outgoing government for the partial privatisation of local hospitals.

There is a huge gulf, however, between the rhetoric employed by the Bremen Left Party and the practice of the party as a whole. In Berlin, the Left Party has shared power with the SPD in a state coalition for nearly six years and has implemented all of the policies Erlanson now criticizes in Bremen. In the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the PDS labour minister has privatised more hospitals than most conservative run German states.

Above all, the election result in Bremen makes one thing clear: it underlines the urgent need for a new socialist party which draws the necessary lessons from the turn to the right by the Greens and the glaring opportunism of the Left Party and arms the growing opposition to the German government with an international socialist perspective.



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