

An exchange on the result of the election in Hesse, Germany

Ulrich Rippert
14 February 2008

The WSWS received the following letter in response to the article “German state elections reveal pronounced shift to the left by electorate.”

In my opinion, and to put it politely, Ulrich Rippert is going out on a limb in his estimate of the elections. He writes of a pronounced shift to the left. And then after this dubious headline he deals with the results of the Left Party. In so doing Rippert gives the impression that the vote for this outpouring of cultural decline is left. Hopefully this is not the case.

The fact that this party was elected [the Left Party received just over 5 percent of the vote and therefore acquired the total necessary to enter the Hesse state parliament—ed.] shows the political naïveté of the population, who still base themselves on the ideology of postwar social reformism, existing capitalist conditions and an abhorrence of authoritarian-type socialism.

The result in Hesse is an anti-Koch result and this demonstrates how superficial and above all how haphazard the political thinking of people is at present. As Rippert himself writes, it was the better situated who shifted over to the SPD. How can this be interpreted as a shift to the left?

It would have been a shift to the left if the PSG [Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—Socialist Equality Party] had increased its vote. Rippert passes over this fact, however. Is it natural that the PSG not only failed to get [an increase in votes], but in fact even lost around 250 votes? An analysis of the election has to start here and not with the shift to the left which favoured the SED [Stalinist ruling party in the former GDR and forerunner of the Left Party], or the SPD [Social Democratic Party].

At least since 1998, and following the substantial welfare cuts imposed by the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition, the conditions in Germany are such that a party like the PSG should be swimming like a fish in the water. Those are 10 long years.

Is the immaturity of the working class the reason why the PSG has not been able to make any progress? One should seek to avoid such explanations. We have learnt this lesson sufficiently in the GDR [former Stalinist East Germany].

If I could be allowed to give my own estimation of the election: It has so far not been possible for the PSG to successfully plant even a seed of curiosity about Marxism and socialism in layers of the population—let alone a Marxist culture.

This is something to think about if one is honest, has a sense of responsibility and knows that history does not allow Marxists unlimited time. Different types of shifts could follow this shift to the left if one proceeds from the current consciousness of people and how the official political mechanism works.

Friendly greetings,

SR

Dear SR,

In your letter to the editorial board you reject our estimation that the Hesse state election of January 27 represents a pronounced shift to the left by the population. Instead you evaluate the votes for the Left Party to be the result of the “political naïveté of the people,” who “still base

themselves on the ideology of postwar social reformism” and “existing capitalist conditions.” You say that it is only possible to speak of a real shift to the left when the PSG is able, at least partially, to convince layers of the population of the necessity of socialism and increase its own share of the vote. You maintain that the PSG has been unable to do this up to now.

Your standpoint attests to a broad lack of understanding of the deep social and political changes that we are currently going through and inevitably leads to pessimistic and demoralized political conclusions. If one follows your arguments, then a shift to the left on the part of the working class is only conceivable as a result of the subjective efforts of our party. You thereby assign us a Herculean task, which based on your own pessimistic estimate of the level of awareness of the working class, cannot possibly be achieved. You neglect to say what we should change with regard to our politics. But it is not difficult to see that your critique throws into question our entire political perspective.

Our differences of opinion are therefore not restricted to the estimation of the result of the Hesse election. They are also bound up with theoretical and political points of view, which make you completely blind to the present changes taking place in the class conflict.

As Marxists we understand the class conflict as an objective process. Social being determines social consciousness, and not the propaganda of our party. Our task is to fight in the working class for an understanding of the international political changes, the working class’s own position in society and the consequent tasks to be mastered.

These priorities were at the heart of our election campaign in Hesse. Our election program analysed the effects of the crisis of the global financial system, the decline of US imperialism, the increase in international conflicts and wars and proved the impossibility of any return to a policy based on social compromise. We put forward an international, socialist program, which enabled the working class to intervene in political life as an independent force.

The election campaign was extremely successful. We were able to familiarise thousands of workers and young people with our program and thereby prepare them for future class struggles. We conducted a campaign of systematic opposition to the Left Party, which is intent on heading off the growing radicalisation of the population and directing it into harmless channels. We used every opportunity to speak out at meetings of the Left Party to demonstrate the contradiction between the right-wing content of the policies carried out by the party in Berlin, and the left-wing clichés contained in their election program. When confronted with these issues the left poses struck by the Left Party’s leadership simply fell apart. This was extremely instructive not only for the voters in Hesse, but also for the readership of the WSWS in other countries, where the Left Party is put forward as some sort of political role model.

In this respect the number of votes received by the candidates of the PSG is secondary. The fact that our total remained small is not surprising. In light of the powerful polarization in the election many voters looked for

a possibility of voting out Koch and—despite having sympathy with our program—voted for the Left Party or the SPD. As a Marxist party our work is not based on the prospect of gradually increasing our influence within the parliamentary system, but rather to prepare the working class for the rapid and precipitous changes in political developments, which often take very unexpected forms.

Your letter indicates a lack of understanding of these questions. It underestimates the sharpness of the political situation and is characterised by a large degree of complacency and arrogance with regard to the working class.

The living conditions of millions of workers and their families have worsened dramatically in the past few years. For months, the media has been dominated by reports of the rapidly growing pauperisation at the bottom of society while a minority have been able to enrich themselves enormously. In addition there have a series of new alarming reports on the consequences of the international financial crisis and the expansion of military deployments by the German army. This has left deep marks on the consciousness of the masses. It is confirmed not only by the decline in the support for social democracy, which is completely discredited and has lost large numbers of voters and members, but also the broad popular support for the dispute of German train drivers last year, and the current radicalisation evident in the latest round of wage contract bargaining.

The emergence of the Left Party and its recent election successes must be understood in this context. The Left Party is not some sort of distorted expression of the radicalisation of the working class, but rather a deliberate attempt by a layer of the bureaucracy within the SPD, the PDS [Party of Democratic Socialism, now a component of the Left Party] and trade unions to suffocate such a radicalisation. Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine, who quit his leading function in the government led by Gerhard Schröder nine years ago, has now returned to political life intent on preventing growing popular discontent from developing into an independent class movement.

In order to fulfil this task, however, the Left Party must adopt a leftist, anti-capitalist stance. That is why your statement, that the casting of votes for the Left Party means that people base themselves on existing capitalist conditions, is false. Those seeking to consciously maintain such conditions voted for the SPD or the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which openly defend them. The casting of votes for the Left Party on the other hand was regarded by many as a possibility of sending a shot across the bows of the SPD and expressing their opposition to the right-wing, anti-social policies embodied in Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV laws.

It is certainly not our intention to play down the illusions that are bound up with the casting of votes for the Left Party. But these illusions do not have very deep roots. It was a different situation in the course of the political radicalisation in the 1970s, when tens of thousands joined the SPD and took an active part in the election campaign of SPD leader Willy Brandt. Today there is no corresponding growth by the Left Party. Support for the organisation is generally limited to the ballot box. The attendance at election meetings of the Left Party was usually small. Such meetings had more to do with a pensioners club, consisting of people who had known one another for decades from joint work in the SPD and trade unions. It is only through the efforts of such petty-bourgeois radical groups as “Linksruck “ and “Voran” that there are any young faces in the Left Party.

The Left Party has been able to benefit largely from the fact that it has had no opposition from the left. An important success of our own election campaign was the fact that we were able to alter this situation and openly and repeatedly challenge the Left Party.

The substantial loss of support for the CDU in Hesse and its leading candidate Roland Koch makes clear the shift that has taken place within the population. Nine years ago Koch was able to win the state election with the help of a campaign directed against foreigners and proposals for

dual nationality. This time his attempt to exploit a similar sort of campaign against juvenile immigrants backfired for him badly. It led to a wave of the indignation and support for Koch melted away within a short period of time.

The ruling elite has understood the meaning of this result very well—unlike yourself. The devastating defeat unleashed a sense of a shock. In the meantime, violent factional struggles have emerged within the conservative parties and the SPD as to how one should best respond to the shift to the left in the population. Barely a day goes by without one politician or another from the CSU (Christian Social Union), CDU, SPD or the FDP (Free Democratic Party) calling either for some social concessions or, on the other hand, a tougher confrontational course. In terms of political content there is little to choose between the parties. The sole issue is how one can best master social opposition.

A part of the media—including the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*—are openly calling for the integration of the Left Party into government in order to prevent social conflicts from developing into a extra-parliamentary movement against the capitalist system. Under the heading “Dare to go left!” *Die Zeit* demanded that the SPD “finally stop demonising the Left Party in the west,” while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* asked, “Who is afraid of the red man?” and then quoted the political expert Josef Esser: “These are all respectable and committed people ... they could just as well be in the SPD.”

Just one last point. You refer repeatedly to the “political naïveté of the people,” how “superficial and above all haphazard the political thinking of people is at present”, and the danger of “different types of shifts” arising “if one proceeds from the current consciousness of people.” In other words: in light of the naïveté and superficiality of the masses all it needs is for a right-wing demagogue to emerge for the masses to trail along behind him.

There is a long tradition of such arguments. Theoreticians of the Frankfurt School drew profoundly pessimistic conclusions from the tragedies of the 20th century. For such people the victory of the Nazis 75 years ago and the subsequent terror, including the Holocaust, were proof of the inability of the working class to prevent a lapse into barbarism and develop a socialist society. The theoreticians of the GDR also put forward similar points of view to justify their right to patronize and terrorize the working class while nipping any independent workers movement in the bud. Both the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School and the GDR bureaucracy denied the responsibility of Stalinism and social democracy (SPD), which both capitulated to Hitler, although broad sections of the working class supported both parties.

Our party—the Fourth International—is living proof of the fact that there was an alternative to Stalinism. The physical destruction of the Trotskyists and associated political decapitation of the working class by the Stalinist bureaucracy was a major factor in the victory of the fascists. In light of the rapid changes in the political situation and the increasing radicalisation amongst workers and young people these historical questions assume a burning significance. Our political intervention in the Hesse election campaign was an important step in strengthening the influence of the PSG for the coming political struggles.

With socialist greetings,

Ulrich Rippert



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