State election in Hesse: A vote against the German grand coalition

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The result of Sunday's election in the German state of Hesse represents a major rebuff to the federal grand coalition government in Berlin. Out of a total of 4.4 million eligible voters in the state, just 1.6 million, or 36 percent, voted for either the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) or the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The two parties have formed the federal government for the past three-and-a-half years. Hesse makes clear that the protracted decline of Germany's so-called "people's parties" is continuing apace.

Approximately 1.8 million voters chose to abstain in the election or spoilt their ballot papers. The voter turnout of 61 percent was an all-time low. In the previous state election one year ago, 64 percent of the electorate went to the polls.

The SPD obtained its worst-ever result in the state, winning just 23.7 percent. This represents a loss of nearly 400,000 votes (13 percentage points) compared to a year ago. Nearly half of former SPD voters did not bother to vote, while 120,000 switched their vote to the Greens.

The losses for the SPD had been generally expected after the Hesse SPD chairperson, Andrea Ypsilanti, failed to establish a coalition government with the Greens, backed by the Left Party. She had categorically ruled out any collaboration with the Left Party prior to the 2008 election.

But the result for the CDU came as a surprise. Against all expectations, the CDU was unable to profit from the slump in support for the SPD and actually lost 46,000 votes compared to 2008, when the party suffered dramatic losses. This time around, the CDU notched up a tiny proportional increase in votes of 0.4 percent, its total vote share reaching only 37.2 percent. This marginal percentage increase was due entirely to decreased voter turnout.

The main winners in the election were the "free market" Free Democratic Party (FPD) and the Greens, which both increased their share of the vote by more than 6 percentage points to 16.2 and 13.7 percent, respectively. Together with the FDP, which had expressed its preference for a coalition with the CDU during the election campaign, the acting minister-president, Roland Koch (CDU), has a safe majority in the state.

Most analyses of the election explain the result in Hesse as a product of the "political turbulence of recent months"—in particular, the conflicts surrounding the attempt to establish a coalition of the SPD and Greens supported by the Left Party, which finally collapsed following a revolt by four right-wingers in the SPD leadership.

However, while that may have affected the result, it was not the crucial factor.

The election of the state parliament on Sunday took place under radically different conditions to those that prevailed in 2008. It was the first state election in Germany since the outbreak of the severest economic crisis since the 1930s. Since the bursting of the American subprime housing bubble in the summer of 2007, German banks have announced losses in the billions of euros and the government has made gigantic sums available to prop up the financial sector. In the meantime, the world economy has entered a major recession, which will deepen in 2009.

Under these circumstances, the Hesse election has revealed the enormous gulf that has opened up between the established political parties and broad layers of the population. The high abstention rate, together with the loss of support for the SPD and CDU, reflects the widespread distrust and hostility toward parties that

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have been engaged for many years in attacking social gains and democratic rights in collaboration with the banks and corporations.

The increase in votes for the FDP and the Greens appears to contradict this assessment. A poll for the ARD, however, reveals that more than half of those who voted for these two parties were not voting out of conviction, but rather because they distrusted the other parties even more. This means that the gains for the FDP and the Greens are an expression of general discontent with the major parties, under conditions where no serious alternative is at hand.

In terms of policy, both parties are virtually identical to the SPD and the CDU. The leading candidate of the Hessian FDP, Jörg Uwe Hahn, was unable to explain what distinguished his own party from the CDU, even on election night. For their part, the Greens have made clear they are prepared to form coalitions with both the SPD and the CDU.

Another notable aspect of the Hesse election is the result for the Left Party, which was unable to increase its vote although the SPD lost over a third of its voters. The Left Party will reenter the Hessian state parliament on the basis of its 5.4 percent share of the vote, but this total actually represents a loss of 1,700 votes compared to a year ago. The Left Party was explicitly founded with the aim of sweeping up layers of the SPD as the latter breaks apart. In this respect, the Left Party failed miserably.

Superficial analyses have sought to explain this result by arguing that voters do not like "extremes." The real problem, however, is that there is nothing in the slightest that is "extreme" about the Left Party.

In the course of the past year, it has done everything in its power to demonstrate its reliability to the established parties. It handed Ypsilanti a blank check for her planned SPD-Green coalition. In the east of Germany and in Berlin, where the party shares power, it has long functioned as a defender of the established order.

The stagnation of the Left Party has other causes. Only a slender minority believes that its programme—a form of warmed-over 1970s-style social reformism—is capable of providing an answer to the global economic crisis.

Most workers are realistic enough to understand that the deepest crisis of the capitalist economy in over 70 years cannot be patched up with an "increase in the purchasing power of the masses" and other such measures that the Left Party proposes without the slightest intention of ever implementing them. Workers are searching for a more radical solution, but are unable to identify it at present. This explains the massive abstention and the inflated votes for the FDP and the Greens, which are hard pressed to account for their own success. This is a temporary phenomenon, however.

The extent of the crisis, which intensifies on a daily basis, has placed fierce class struggles on the agenda. The ruling class and its parties—the CDU, FDP, SPD, Greens and Left Party—are determined to shift the consequences of the crisis onto the backs of the working population. It is necessary to prepare for the forthcoming struggles by building an independent and genuinely socialist workers' party—that is, the Socialist Equality Party.

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