

Social democratic parties suffer historic defeat in European Union elections

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European social democratic parties were the principal targets of electoral anger in the European elections completed on Sunday. A number of the continent's most prominent social democratic organisations recorded record low levels of support. At the same time, the low level of voter turnout, just over forty percent, reflected profound disillusionment among broad layers of the electorate with the European parliament and all of the institutions associated with the European Union.

In Britain, the Labour Party's share of the vote dropped to 15.3 percent and the party finished in third place behind the Conservatives (24 seats) and the right-wing nationalist United Kingdom Independence Party (14 seats). The Labour Party will send just 12 deputies to the new European parliament. The election result is widely seen as a further nail in the political coffin of the beleaguered British prime minister and Labour Party leader, Gordon Brown.

In Germany, the electorate punished the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which received just 20.8 percent of the vote—its worst ever election showing in postwar German history. In the last European election in 2004, the SPD recorded what was seen as a catastrophically low vote of 21 percent, as the German electorate delivered a decisive repudiation of the pro-corporate and anti-welfare policies of the SPD-Green Party coalition government that was in power at the time. In this year's European election, despite desperate attempts by the SPD leadership to restyle the party as an advocate of the working man, the result was even worse. Newspapers describe crestfallen faces at the SPD headquarters in Berlin as the results came through.

In France, despite the fact that President Nicolas Sarkozy has been registering record low levels of popularity, the opposition Socialist Party was unable to make gains. It received just 16.8 percent of the vote, more than ten points behind Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). The Socialist Party fell to third place in the French capital of Paris, and at the national level barely surpassed the Green Europe-Ecology Party, which won 16 percent.

Sunday's result in France represents a reversal of the European election of 2004, when the French Socialists won 29 percent, with the UMP trailing far behind with 16.6 percent. Sources inside the party are already comparing the 2009 result to the 2002 presidential election, when the Socialist Party candidate, then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, ended in third place behind the candidate of the fascist National Front and was eliminated from the presidential runoff.

The social democratic parties of Great Britain, Germany and France are amongst the oldest political parties in their respective countries. All of them played a decisive role in the stabilisation of bourgeois rule in the twentieth century. Their disastrous results in the current European election represent a political point of no return for the parties themselves and augur a period of profound political instability.

In other leading countries with a Socialist Party-led government (Spain) or where the Socialist Party plays a leading role in a government coalition

(Austria), voters turned massively against these parties. The Austrian Socialist Party lost a third of its support compared to the European elections of 2004 and recorded its worst-ever election result.

The main parties and organisations to benefit from the fall in support for social democratic parties were conservative and extreme right-wing parties.

The new European parliament

The parliamentary faction of social democratic organisations—the Party of European Socialists (PES)—is expected to retain 159 of the 217 seats it held in the outgoing parliament, representing a loss of around one quarter of its delegation.

The block of European conservative organisations—the European People's Party (EPP)—will retain its position as the largest grouping in the European Parliament, with an estimated 267 (36 percent) of the assembly's 736 seats. This is a decline from the 288 seats it held in the outgoing parliament. The UMP in France, the Conservatives in Britain and the Christian Democrats in Germany all hailed the election as confirmation of their popular support.

An examination of the polling statistics, however, reveals that while the conservatives were able to improve their vote in a number of major European countries, their overall result was far less than an unqualified victory. In Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by the current chancellor, Angela Merkel, saw its share of the vote fall by nearly 6 percent (over a million votes) compared to the European election of 2004. In Great Britain, the United Kingdom Independence Party was the principal beneficiary of Labour's losses, rather than the UK's oldest party, the Conservative (Tory) Party.

Despite gains for free market liberal parties in some countries—notably Germany, where layers of traditional CDU voters switched to the Free Democratic Party—the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) also saw its support decline. It gained 81 seats, as compared to 100 seats in the outgoing parliament.

Notwithstanding the success of the United Kingdom Independence Party, the “euro-skeptical” faction, Independence and Democracy (Ind/Dem), also lost support. The faction's former total of 24 seats has now been reduced to 18.

The faction of the European Left, which is predominantly made up of Stalinist and middle-class “left” organisations, was also unable to benefit from widespread discontent with the social democratic parties. In a number of countries, such leftist groupings did increase their vote—notably the Left Bloc in Portugal, which won 10.73 percent of the vote, and the recently formed Left Front in France, with 6.3 percent.

In Germany, the coalition of post-Stalinists and trade union bureaucrats

united in the Left Party were able to increase their share of the vote by just over one percent, and will have 8 seats in the new parliament. Overall, however, the faction of the European Left lost 7 seats and was reduced to just 34 delegates in the new parliament.

In its first electoral intervention, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot in France failed to gain the five percent minimum necessary for representation in the European parliament, polling 4.8 percent.

The Green faction was able to increase its representation, largely due to gains in France and Germany. It won 11 new seats, increasing its total to 54. The election campaign of the Greens in both Germany and France was characterised by breathtaking opportunism, in which both parties sought to appeal to disoriented layers of the middle class with a mixture of populist promises and unstinting defence of anti-social policies. In Upper Austria, where the Greens have shared power for the past five years in a ruling coalition with the conservatives, the party lost about a third of its support.

Another faction which will increase its presence in the new parliament is the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), which includes conservative and right-wing populist parties such as Italy's Northern League. It gained 19 new seats and will have a total representation of 35 deputies.

Extreme right-wing nationalist parties appeared to gain the most from the collapse in support for the social democratic organisations. In the Netherlands, the anti-Islamic Freedom Party, led by Geert Wilders, won some 17 percent of the vote, making it the country's second strongest party in the European parliament. In Austria, the Freedom Party doubled its 2004 vote, polling 12 percent.

With 4.7 percent, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), formerly led by the deceased right-wing populist Jörg Haider, failed to meet the requirement for representation in the EU parliament, but right-wing EU deputy Hans-Peter Martin was able to win nearly 18 percent of the vote with his own list. In the election campaign, Martin combined rhetoric opposing the EU bureaucracy in Brussels with xenophobic slogans.

Far-right populists were also able to make gains in Finland, Denmark, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and the UK, where the far-right British National Party won two seats.

In Hungary, the right-wing Peoples League (Fidesz), led by ex-Premier Viktor Orbán, won 56 percent of the vote, while the openly neo-fascist Jobbik organisation won around 15 percent of the vote. Here the ability of far-right parties to capitalise on the political vacuum left by the political betrayals and disintegration of social democratic parties is particularly evident. Both Fidesz and Jobbik were able to profit from the complete collapse in support for the ruling Socialist Party, which, with 17 percent, polled less than a third of the vote obtained by Fidesz.

While extreme rightist and Euro-skeptical tendencies were able to make headway in a number of countries, this does not reflect broad popular support for their policies. First, the extremely low level of participation means that in most countries the majority of the population did not turn out to vote. In Hungary, only a third of the electorate cast votes. In other Eastern European and Baltic states the totals were even lower. Only 19.6 of Slovaks voted and just 20.5 percent in Lithuania.

Second, far-right parties saw a decline in support in Belgium and France, where the National Front of Le Pen lost four seats. Extreme right parties which had formerly polled well in Poland—the League of Polish Families and the Self-Defence party—failed to win enough support to enter the European parliament.

The elections were the first to be held across Europe since the onset of the gravest economic crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s. They provided the first opportunity for the European electorate to pass judgment on its major parties.

The results amount to a statement of no-confidence in the ruling elites across Europe and of the institutions of the European Union. The majority

of European voters expressed their disgust with the European Union and the various national governments by not turning out to vote. Those who did vote punished, in particular, the governments of those countries hit hardest by the crisis. The governing parties of Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria, Ireland and Spain, irrespective of whether they are conservative or social democratic, all suffered a catastrophic drop in support.

At the same time, the electorate rejected all those parties which are most closely associated with the causes and perpetuation of the current crisis—the German Social Democrats under former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who promoted free market policies and savaged the German welfare state, the Labour Party of Tony Blair, whose “Third Way” completed the transformation of Britain into a veritable paradise for speculators, and the “socialist” government in Spain led by José Luiz Zapatero, which presides over the highest unemployment in Western Europe.

Moreover, the decline in electoral support for the organisations comprising the “European Left” makes clear that voters have no confidence in a perspective which seeks to replace the collapsed social democratic perspective with a newly minted edition of reformism. The consequences of such a perspective are especially evident in the case of Italy, where the discredited right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi has been able to survive solely due to the political subservience and cowardice of the country's nominal left and “far-left.”

The growth of neo-liberal and ultra-right forces represents a real danger in Eastern Europe and a number of Western European countries. The British Conservative Party has announced its intention of quitting the European conservative block—the European People's Party (EPP)—to ally itself with Euro-skeptical and extreme rightist forces inside Europe. Such a step would only exacerbate centrifugal nationalist tendencies.

The capitalist European Union is a trap for the working class. The only progressive solution to the growing crisis is the unification of the working population across the continent to establish its own socialist alternative—the Socialist United States of Europe. This was the perspective put forward in the elections by the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). The PSG won a relatively small vote, just short of ten thousand votes. What is clear, however, is that these votes represent conscious support for a program which clearly articulates the implications of the current international crisis and provides a revolutionary and internationalist political axis for the working class.



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