

The decline of social democracy

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The most notable result of the European elections held last weekend is the dramatic decline of social democracy.

On average across Europe, social democratic parties received only 22 percent of the vote, six percent less than in the previous European election in 2004. With a turnout of just 43 percent, this means that less than one in ten of the electorate voted for these parties.

Average European figures distort the real extent of the decline. In the major industrial countries of Western Europe, where social democratic parties have led governments for decades or functioned as the main opposition party, their losses were huge—irrespective of whether the parties are currently in government or opposition.

In Great Britain, where the Labour Party has been in power for the past twelve years, Labour's support plummeted to a record low of 16 percent—lower than the vote received by the extreme right-wing UK Independence Party. In Spain, the ruling Socialist Party lost five percentage points and trailed the right-wing Peoples Party. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has been in government for eleven years, recorded an historic low of 21 percent. In Portugal, support for the ruling Socialist Party fell from 45 to 27 percent.

In France, where the Socialist Party has been in opposition for the past seven years, the party received just 17 percent—a decline of 12 percentage points compared to five years ago. In Italy, support for the Democratic Party, which is a successor organisation to the Italian Communist Party and other “left” parties,

plunged from 31 percent to 26 percent. In Denmark, the opposition Social Democrats lost 12 percentage points and finished with a total of 21 percent. The vote for the Dutch Labour Party was halved to 12 percent, and in Austria it sank from 33 percent to 24 percent.

This decline is all the more remarkable when one bears in mind that the election took place in the midst of the most severe world economic crisis since the 1930s. Although unemployment is rising rapidly and the living conditions of broad layers of the population have worsened considerably, voters are deserting the social democrats in droves.

The cause for this shift is to be found in the politics and character of the social democratic parties, which have for many years functioned like any other bourgeois party. In the past two decades, they have used their influence, in close alliance with the trade unions, to carry out the sort of social attacks that had provoked massive resistance when attempted by conservative governments.

In Britain, the Labour Party led by Tony Blair adopted the program of the Conservative Party's “iron lady,” Margaret Thatcher, while the German SPD led by Gerhard Schröder passed the anti-welfare Hartz laws and carried out more attacks on social rights than all previous conservative governments put together.

The British *Financial Times* in an editorial on Tuesday pointed to the seeming anomaly of massive electoral losses for parties historically associated with socialism under conditions of growing popular disillusionment with capitalism. It correctly noted that, in fact, there are no serious differences in economic and social policy between the social democratic and conservative parties. The newspaper wrote: “At a time

when ‘the end of capitalism’ is raised as a serious prospect, the parties whose historical mission was to replace capitalism with socialism offer no governing philosophy. Their anti-crisis policies are barely distinguishable from those of their rivals.”

Today there are barely any workers to be found in the leadership of the social democratic parties, and a rapidly dwindling number of workers in the party ranks. Many who join these parties do so not to realise political ideals, but to further their own careers. Opportunism, a complete lack of principle and arrogance toward the working class are the most important prerequisites for advancement within these organisations.

In Germany, a career in the SPD is regarded as a springboard to a good-paying job in public service or the private economy. Former SPD Chairman Rudolf Scharping is today a business consultant, whose clients include the hedge fund Cerberus and the billionaire Maria-Elisabeth Schaeffler. Former Chancellor Schröder, who led the SPD for a long period of time, has a string of boardroom positions—most notably with the world’s biggest energy concern, the Russian-based Gazprom.

When millions of workers turn their back on social democracy in the middle of an economic crisis, it shows one thing: they no longer expect any solution to their problems from these parties.

The election result also expressed a broad rejection of the European parliament. The job of the parliament is to provide a pseudo-democratic cover for the institutions of the European Union and the army of 40,000 well-paid bureaucrats in Brussels who, in turn, serve at the beck and call of a comparable army of business lobbyists.

Vast numbers of voters, especially from the working class, refrained from casting ballots. The biggest party in the election was the party of non-voters. At 43 percent, voter participation was 2.5 percentage points lower than the previous record low turnout, in 2004. In Holland, Great Britain and most Eastern European countries, turnout was less than 40 percent.

The resulting political vacuum was exploited by conservative and right-wing parties. This has led many commentators to speak of a “turn to the right” in Europe. Such a conclusion is unwarranted and superficial. Right-wing parties were able to exploit the collapse in support for social democracy and the low turnout. In most cases, however, they failed to increase their vote and in some cases saw their support decline significantly.

Even extreme right, xenophobic parties that gained significantly—such as Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in Holland (17 percent), the UK Independence Party (17 percent), and the British National Party (6 percent)—have, based on the low voter turnout of 35 percent in the two countries, less support than their results suggest.

What is evident in the European election is a sharp social polarisation. Until now, the ruling classes have been able to rely on the social democratic parties and the trade unions to suppress social struggles. The decline of these organisations means that future class confrontations will take a more open and explosive form.

Workers must prepare for such an eventuality. The initiative cannot be left to the ruling class. The electoral gains of ultra-right groupings is a warning. The European working class needs its own party based on a revolutionary and international socialist program.

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