

Election in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia—Preparation for a government of confrontation

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The outcome of the election in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia, the country's most populous state, is characterized by a striking contradiction. Many voters used the ballot to punish the anti-social policies of the Christian Democrat Union/Christian Social Union-Free Democratic Party (CDU/CSU-FDP) government at the state and federal levels. However, efforts are now under way to use the election results to bring a government to power that will push through even more stringent social welfare cuts than the current one.

The poll last Sunday was the first state election since last year's federal elections in September, and was generally regarded as a major test for right-wing CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition with the free market FDP. The rejection of the CDU-FDP state government in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) could hardly have been clearer. Compared to the state elections five years ago, the CDU lost 10.2 percent of the vote, and scored its worst result ever in NRW, with just 34.6 percent.

The FDP obtained 6.7 percent of the vote, no better than its result five years ago. Compared to the 14.9 percent it achieved in the national election just over six months ago, it lost 8.2 percent. Moreover, turnout plummeted to a historic low of 59.3 percent. More than 40 percent of voters expressed their rejection of government policy and all the parties by abstaining.

The election campaign took place against the background of a rapidly deteriorating international financial and economic situation. Last year, the national coalition government had sought to conceal the true extent of the crisis, putting off planned social cuts until after the NRW election. With the help of various stimulus programmes, the extension of short-time working subsidies and the 'cash for clunkers' incentive scheme, it tried to give the impression

that the worst was over. Many editorials claimed that the German economy had survived the international crisis "surprisingly well".

The events in Greece, however, refuted this propaganda. In recent weeks it became clear that the brutal austerity measures against the Greek population are a prelude to a general attack on the working class throughout Europe. Crisis meetings were held in Berlin and Brussels in parallel with the NRW election last Sunday. In expedited proceedings, the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) passed a "gigantic rescue plan to avert a debt crisis in the euro area", in the words of newsweekly *Die Zeit*.

This second billion-euro rescue package in the interests of the international banks is being combined with massive attacks on wages, pensions and social standards in every European country. In preparation for these inevitable attacks, influential sections of the German ruling class had come to the conclusion that the CDU/CSU-FDP federal government was too weak or discredited to enforce the proposed social cuts against the anticipated resistance.

They used the NRW election as a lever to "adjust" federal politics to this changed situation, as was noted in several editorials. The main objective of this political readjustment was to bring the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—and with it, the trade unions—more closely into the government. This makes a grand coalition of the SPD and CDU possible; collaboration with the Greens is also another potential scenario, either with the SPD (a so-called "red-green coalition") or even with the Christian Democrats (a so-called "black-green coalition").

That was the reason for an intensive and aggressive media intervention in the NRW election campaign. The leading candidates of the SPD (Hannelore Kraft) and the Greens

were deliberately built up and presented in a positive light, while the incumbent state Premier Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU), and especially the FDP, confronted negative headlines. Seldom before was the media manipulation in an election campaign as obvious as in the past few weeks on the Rhine and Ruhr.

At the beginning of the year, opinion polls showed the SPD lagging far behind the CDU. However, the SPD then rose in the polls week by week, and in the NRW election it received a 34.5 percent share, just 6,000 votes behind the CDU. Kraft was celebrated as the election “winner”, and the media called her a political sensation, the “great comeback of the SPD”.

In truth, the SPD scored its worst result since 1954 in the party’s former industrial stronghold. Compared to the “catastrophic election” five years ago in NRW, which the then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) took as a decisive rejection of his Agenda 2010 welfare cuts and a reason for the early termination of the SPD-Green government coalition in Berlin, the SPD lost a further 2.6 percent on Sunday in NRW.

In order to talk up the result, some media reports cited the negative record of the federal election last year as the comparative figure. At that time, the SPD slumped to 28.5 percent in NRW. But that does not make things any better. In absolute terms, the SPD has lost several thousand votes compared to the general election. Only the low turnout means the percentage share is now higher.

The Greens doubled their share of the vote to 12.1 percent compared to 2005. But in absolute terms, they received 5,000 votes less than in the general election last autumn.

The alleged rebirth of a SPD-Green coalition is pure propaganda by the media, which is supported by some employers’ associations, because they consider that the SPD and the Greens are far better suited than the FDP to enforce the planned attacks in the form of an Agenda 2020.

What little hope the working class sets in the SPD was also apparent in the performance of the Left Party. Its campaign was directed towards supporting the SPD, and it never tired of presenting the Social Democrats as the lesser evil. Again and again, the Left Party offered itself as lackeys of the SPD.

But on election night they got their just deserts. Compared to the federal elections last year, the Left Party dropped from 8.4 to 5.4 percent, and received 370,000 fewer votes. Even

compared to the NRW state elections five years ago, when the component parts of the Left Party (the Party of Democratic Socialist [PDS] and the Election Alternative) still functioned separately, the Left Party received almost 20,000 fewer votes.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) did not stand candidates in the election. But the PSG rejected the bankrupt and reactionary politics of the Left Party. In a commentary on the eve of the election, we wrote:

“There is nothing to choose in tomorrow’s elections. There is not a single party in this election representing the interests of working people. No matter what the composition of the next government in the state capital Düsseldorf—CDU-FDP, SPD-Green, a grand coalition, or a so-called ‘traffic light’ coalition (CDU-SPD-FDP) or CDU-Green—no matter who sits on the government benches or on the opposition benches, it will be an all-party coalition against the population. It will initiate a scale of social cutbacks overshadowing everything previously.

“The working class must prepare for major social battles, which will begin immediately after the election. This requires the building of the PSG as a section of the Fourth International. The PSG is the only party that has drawn the lessons from the great tragedies and defeats of the 1930s, and fights for an international socialist programme. The big corporations and banks must be expropriated and production placed under the democratic control of working people. Only on this basis can the power of the ruling financial aristocracy be broken.”



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