Major gains for far-right Freedom Party in Vienna election

Markus Salzmann
22 October 2010

On October 10, the rightwing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) made significant gains in the Vienna city council election. Winning around 200,000 votes, it was almost able to double its result in 2005. In a turnout of 68 percent—considerably higher than 5 years ago—it received 26 percent of votes cast.

The Social Democratic Party (SPO) and its Mayor Michael Haeupl—who held office for 16 years—lost its absolute majority in the Austrian capital for the first time in years. Their vote fell by 5 percent to only 44 percent. Häuple now has to look for a coalition partner.

Governing on the federal level in a coalition with the Social Democrats, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) also suffered heavy losses. It plummeted from 19 to 14 percent to become only the third strongest party, closely followed by the Greens who dropped from 15 to 13 percent.

The Alliance for Austria's Future (BZÖ), which emerged from a split with the Freedom Party, polled 1.3 percent, missing out on representation in Vienna's combined city and state legislative body. The same was the case for the Communist Party with 1.1 percent.

Thus, two years after the death of its long-term leader Joerg Haider, rightwing forces in Austria are again approaching the election success they achieved in 1999. At that time, they emerged as the second largest party in the general election and joined the government headed by Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP).

When it became clear that the racist policies of the FPÖ were only the precursor to massive cuts in social spending, the party quickly lost influence. About two-thirds of the voters turned their backs on it. Although it won 27 percent in 1999, its share of the vote three years later declined to 10 percent. The FPÖ lost in all elections except for those in Haider's base in the state of Carinthia. This loss of votes and a decline in membership led to a mountain of debt totalling several million euros. The nadir of this decline was reached with the fracturing of the party, from which the BZÖ emerged.

The FPÖ primarily owes its re-ascent to the rightwing policies of the social democrats, which have been governing Austria in a grand coalition with the conservatives for three-and-a-half years. The coalition government reacted to the international economic crisis by implementing brutal austerity measures in education, health care and pension endowment.

With public opposition to these spending cuts unable to find any political expression in the ranks of existing political parties, the FPÖ was able to take advantage of mounting social tensions. The social democrats have slashed spending on social housing provoking serious unrest in the capital where an estimated one in three residents is immigrant.

The Freedom Party and its leading candidate Heinz-Christian Strache threw themselves into a rabid smear campaign against immigrants. They published an election cartoon that openly incited racist violence. This featured a blond blue-eyed boy with a slingshot, catapulting a stone at a dark-skinned "Mustafa". In addition to this, there was a cartoon that agitated against the "left". It contained the term "Odal", a deliberate allusion to a Nazi broadsheet from the 1930s, "Odal—monthly for blood and soil".

The social democrats collapsed dramatically in working-class areas like Simmering and Favoriten, where they had controlled 80 percent of the votes 20 years ago. They set the stage for the FPÖs racist hate campaign by trying to outdo them in their immigration and domestic security policies. Haeupl and other leading Viennese SPÖ figures in the election campaign called for tougher security laws and demanded that

© World Socialist Web Site

immigrants try harder to integrate. They also explicitly supported Strache's call for the creation of an official post for an integration officer in the state capital. In Strache's view, this person would be able to take measures against people "unwilling to integrate".

The future leader of the FPÖ faction in Vienna's town hall will be John Gudenus, the former security spokesman for the Vienna FPÖ. He belongs to the extreme right wing of the party and is notorious for his racist and anti-Semitic outbursts. Recently interviewed by the *Standard* newspaper, he claimed that Thilo Sarrazin's xenophobic ideas were a "solution for the future".

It is still possible that the social democrats will form a coalition with the Freedom Party. Although Häupl strongly denied the prospect of any exploratory talks, delegations from both parties met for discussions on several occasions. The long-lasting coalition of both sides in Carinthia has already highlighted the fact that the SPÖ can cooperate with the right wing.

Even after the disastrous defeat in Vienna, the SPÖ insists on its chosen course. Chancellor Faymann says he sees no reason to change policies. When asked about a cabinet reshuffle, he said, "I'm not proposing one". Vice Chancellor Pröll (ÖVP) also gave assurances there would be no personnel or policy changes.

Social democrats and conservatives are moving even further to the right. Faymann has already announced that he will address the issues raised by the extreme right more thoroughly in the next elections. He promised that the SPÖ would "not hide its head" when it comes to the question of integration.

Despite the disastrous election results, it is no surprise that the social democrats are sticking firmly to their political line. The consequences of the international economic crisis are being felt increasingly strongly in the Alpine republic. Like all other parties, the SPÖ is determined to shift the burden of the growing national debt, rising unemployment and economic decline onto the shoulders of the population.

Although the media is currently reporting an "end to the crisis", experts are warning the government against any easing of austerity measures. The current "recovery", they say, is merely a consequence of the economic upturn experienced by Austria's neighbour, Germany, and the situation could reverse itself very quickly.

The Economic Research Institute continues to expect a deficit of more than five percent of gross domestic product (GDP) for this year and a similar figure for the coming year. Despite a slight fall in recent months, unemployment remains almost three percentage points higher than two years ago.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site