

Nationalists gain in Finland vote

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The True Finns party was the only beneficiary in Finland's election held Sunday, April 17, which saw a strong rejection of the ruling four-party coalition. There was a more than 10 percent decline in votes cast for the parties in government—the Centre Party, National Coalition, Green and Swedish People's parties.

The biggest loser in the election was the Centre Party—one of the traditional parties of government in Helsinki. Centre lost over a quarter of its seats, 16, and now has just 35 in the new parliament. It was relegated to fourth place in the election, behind the National Coalition, Social Democrats and True Finns.

The fall in support was across the official spectrum. The National Coalition, which emerged as the largest party, lost six seats and now will control 44. The Social Democrats also lost ground and dropped below 20 percent of the overall vote, returning 42 seats. This is because, despite nominally being in “opposition” to the government for the last four years, they are regarded as virtually indistinguishable from it.

This is the first time in a Finnish post-war parliament that no party will control more than 50 of the 200 seats available.

The True Finns saw its support rise from a little over 4 percent in 2007 to more than 19 percent this time. The right-wing nationalist party is characterised by its hostility to immigrants and the European Union. It now holds 39 seats in parliament and will be involved in coalition talks for a new government.

The result sparked concern within the EU, since party leader Timo Soini has expressed hostility to the EU-backed bailout of Portugal. The Finnish parliament has the power to vote on EU bailouts, and in the event the True Finns enter the government, it is feared that Finnish backing for the financial package could be under threat.

National Coalition leader and incoming Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen has been heavily involved in

the bailout negotiations, and his party supports the deal. Backing would also come from the Centre Party, but outgoing Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi stated on Tuesday that she would not present the bill to parliament in her current capacity.

This means that a majority in favour of the bailout may not be secured in time for a meeting of EU ministers on May 16, which is to decide upon the terms of the deal, since it is expected that government talks could take several weeks.

This issue will complicate government talks on a coalition. The Social Democrats, who would be likely to play a role alongside the True Finns and National Coalition parties, have not given unconditional support to a bailout either.

EU Monetary and Economic Affairs commissioner Olli Rehn gave a clear warning to the incoming government that there would be serious consequences if Helsinki did not support the bailout. “Democracy and the election outcomes need to be respected.... But alongside that the euro group needs to be capable of making decisions in order to prevent Portugal from becoming insolvent”, he said.

True Finns was able to capitalise on hostility to the EU and its role in enforcing the demands of the financial markets through such bailout packages.

Portugal is only the latest country to be forced under pressure from the banks and rating agencies to request “emergency assistance” from the EU. A total of at least €80 billion is expected to be loaned.

This is not “assistance” to the Portuguese people as the True Finns falsely present it. It is the EU mounting a rescue operation for Europe's banks whose speculative and largely criminal activity threatens economic catastrophe for the whole continent. The workers of Portugal, as indeed those across Europe, will be forced to pay for the bailout through the imposition of even deeper austerity measures.

The Finnish election result represents a warning to working people on the urgent necessity for the building of their own socialist party. Absent this, right-wing populist parties capitalise on an array of social problems to put forward their reactionary nationalist “solution”.

True Finns follows in the path of parties such as Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the National Front in France, using nationalist and anti-immigrant prejudice to divide workers and protect the ruling elites who are the architects of the economic crisis.

The party advocates restrictions on immigration, and promoting “Finnish culture”. Part of this includes the call for the ending of the teaching of Swedish in state schools, a measure introduced to recognise Finland’s bilingual status.

True Finns draws part of its support and personnel—including Soini—from the now-defunct Rural Party, a far-right formation that first emerged during elections in 1970. Others come from the Centre Party. One of its most prominent members is Jussi Halla-Aho who writes deliberately provocative articles and blogs setting out his racist views—targeting Muslims in particular.

Both True Finns and Soini have attracted extensive media coverage in the last period. The organisation has been built up as a “popular” alternative to the political establishment, which is widely rejected.

The turn away from the establishment parties comes after a period of mounting uncertainty for the vast majority of the Finnish population. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the country experienced a severe economic and banking crisis, which coincided with similar crises across the Scandinavian region.

Although joining the EU in 1995 offered a certain degree of expansion for Finnish corporations and an upturn in the economy, this was based upon attacking the position of the working class, a task that was carried out by governments led by the Centre and Social Democratic parties alike.

The outgoing coalition, under the leadership of the Centre Party’s Matti Vanhanen until last year, carried out some of the most savage measures, including a multibillion-euro bailout of Finnish banks in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Social spending was

sharply reduced, whilst at the same time finance minister and prime minister designate Jyrki Katainen offered tax breaks for the rich and big business.

Beginning in 2009, the unemployment rate remained over 10 percent for more than a year, and although it has since fallen back slightly, it is still above 8 percent.

Whatever the composition of the new government, its main task will be to deepen the attacks on the working class. Recent reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the EU have called for wide-ranging reform to cut government costs. In the words of EU Commissioner Rehn in 2010, “The task for the coming governments is to reorganise the public economy with a sustained programme that spans several years”.

The targeting of the pension system will likely form a key part of any such programme. The so-called “sustainability gap” in Finnish society is frequently referred to as a means to justify an increase in the retirement age from its current level of 63, together with a reduction in the level of state pensions.

Finland had a budget deficit of more than 4 percent of GDP last year, leading to EU and OECD demands to slash spending. Katainen’s National Coalition has pushed for tax breaks for the richest in society and big business, coupled with reductions in public spending.

The True Finns, whilst portraying themselves as defenders of the welfare state and the elderly during the campaign, have no opposition in principle to this strategy. This was illustrated after the election when Soini sought to backtrack from a previous pledge not to increase VAT, a regressive tax on goods and services that hits the poorest in society most.



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