

Germany's Bremen state election: A vote against the federal government

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In the Bremen state election held last weekend, the parties that form Angela Merkel's governing coalition suffered a massive loss of votes for the fifth time in a row. This rapid decline resembles the final phase of Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic/Green Party coalition, which stepped down in 2005, one year before regular elections.

In Sunday's Bremen election, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) also received fewer votes in a state election than the Green Party for the first time in its history. With 20.4 percent of the vote the CDU had its worst result since 1959, losing 5.3 percentage points in comparison to the state election of 2007.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP) plummeted from 6 to 2.4 percent, and will not be represented in the new *Bürgerschaft* (city-state parliament). The leadership of the Bremen FDP, including its chairman and main candidate Oliver Moellenstadt, resigned on Tuesday evening.

The Greens, who, together with the SPD have governed the northern German city-state since 2007, increased their vote from 16.5 to 22.5 percent. The SPD was also able to gain two percentage points. But its total of 38.7 percent represented its third-worst outcome ever in Bremen, where it has held the mayor's office for 65 years. Only in 1995 and in 2007 were its results worse.

The Left Party, which in 2007 entered a West German state parliament for the first time, lost 2.8 percentage points, but is still a member of the city parliament with a share of 5.6 percent.

Voter participation was extraordinarily low. Almost half the electorate stayed away from the ballot because they found no party that represented their interests. Only 56.5

percent of about 1 million voters participated in the election in Germany's smallest state.

For the first time 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote. Predominantly, the Greens were the beneficiary; around a third of the 10,000 16- to 17-year-olds voted for them; 28 percent voted for SPD, and only 12 percent for the CDU. Eight percent of this age group voted for the Left Party, and 7.5 for the Pirate Party that promotes freedoms in Internet usage.

The Greens are increasingly assuming the role of a conservative bourgeois party.

As was the case of Baden-Württemberg, where the Greens took over the post of governor for the first time in their history, a large proportion of votes for the Greens came from better off and educated layers of the middle class.

The city of Bremen is marked by deep social inequality. While the number of millionaires living in Bremen is above average, poverty and unemployment have continually risen following decades of job reduction in the shipyard industry. In Bremen every third child is considered poor, and in the Bremerhaven district this number is even higher, where 37 percent of children live in a household receiving Hartz IV benefits. In April, the official unemployment rate was 11.2 percent compared to the overall national rate of 7.3 percent.

In their election campaigns, no party seriously focused on poverty and unemployment. Instead, all committed themselves to adhere to the national debt limit, according to which austerity measures amounting to €120 million per year have to be made to reduce the state's debts of €17 billion.

In an interview before the election, city mayor and SPD member Jens Boehrsen explained that free Kindergarten was desirable, “but we just cannot afford it”.

Given the unpopular policies all parties advocated, it comes as little surprise that there was virtually no campaigning. *Spiegel Online* characterized the campaigns in Bremen as “the coma at the Weser” and conceded it mattered little who won. The online magazine quoted the shallow party slogans: “Real Bremen”, “We remain”, “Who else?”, “Do the right thing, now”, and “Show a clear profile”.

The SPD and Greens had already declared during their campaigns that they would continue their coalition. An offer for a coalition of CDU and Greens made by CDU candidate Rita Mohr-Lüllmann was turned down by the Greens’ top candidate and financial chief, Karoline Linnert.

With the exception of the Left Party, the SPD in Bremen has ruled with all of the other main German parties in some form of coalition. Before forming a coalition with the Greens in 2007, the SPD had ruled for 12 years together with the CDU. Twenty years ago the SPD (red), FDP (yellow) and the Greens had formed the first so-called “traffic light coalition” in a West German state.

In light of this history, it comes as no surprise that the official parties are widely rejected. According to a survey made by the Forsa Institute, two thirds of those polled stated that they could not identify with any party.

The Left Party is an integral part of this party syndicate. After entering a Western German parliament for the first time in 2007, claiming that they were an alternative to the SPD and the Greens, they quickly turned out to be a pillar of the SPD/Green state government. In 2009, they even supported the SPD/Green government’s austerity budget.

Afterwards, the Bremen Left Party organisation was rocked by internal conflicts: the city faction fell out with the state party, and the state party with the party as a whole. Left Party delegate Sirvan Cakici quit the party in late November 2010 and entered the SPD, where, as she declared, she had found her political home.

The Left Party’s intention in Bremen, as well as

nationwide, remains the formation of a government with the SPD and Greens. “Our intention is still to become so strong that the SPD and Greens cannot rule without us”, chairman Klaus Ernst said after the election.

In the past, Bremen state elections were frequently an early indicator of important developments. Thirty-two years ago, the Greens entered a state parliament for the first time. In 1991, the first SPD/FDP/Green coalition was formed. And in 2007, the Left Party entered a state parliament for the first time.

Now the CDU has fallen behind the Greens for the first time in a state election. Previously they had lost half their votes in the Hamburg state election, receiving only 21.9 percent of all ballots. At the Berlin state election in September, the CDU is expected to take third place behind the SPD and the Greens.

Certain layers of the ruling class have now recognized the Greens as the best representatives of their interests. The party’s policies hardly differ from those of the CDU, FDP or SPD. They support austerity programs to bail out the banks, as well as the German army’s foreign missions, but they cloak their right-wing policies with euphemistic phrases. Social cuts, for example, are depicted as “investments into the future”. War is renamed “protecting civilians” and “enforcing peace”. The population increasingly sees through this Orwellian Newspeak.

The Bremen state elections highlight the deep chasm between the working population and official politics. It is the harbinger of open class struggle.



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