

German Pirate Party takes 7 percent in Saarland state election

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Five and a half years after its foundation, the German Pirate Party entered a second state parliament, winning 7.4 percent of the vote in the Saarland on Sunday. The party overtook both the Greens and the FDP, and will have the fourth largest contingent of deputies in the new parliament. At a federal level the party is forecast to win up to seven percent of the vote.

Contrary to media reports, which devoted a great deal of attention to its electoral success, the vote for the party has little to do with any fundamental new orientation of behalf of young voters. Rather, the voting results express a widespread rejection of the entire political establishment. In the absence of a progressive alternative, the Pirates were able to profit from such protest votes.

Growing layers of the population are turning their backs on official politics under conditions where all of the parties are closing ranks and centering their policies on fiscal consolidation, compliance with debt brakes, and social cuts. Ruling circles in Germany are concerned about the growing alienation of the electorate from mainstream politics. The Pirate Party is one initiative aimed at retaining opposition layers within the framework of bourgeois politics and preventing the development of a socialist alternative.

Election statistics reveal that the Pirate Party was able to win support from all layers of voters under the age of 60, and not just a younger generation that has grown up with the Internet. According to polling organization Infratest Dimap, the Pirates had a high level of support from the 18- to 24-year-old age group (22 percent), but also recorded only slightly below average support from voters between the ages of 45 and 59 years (six percent).

This range of support covers a very broad social milieu.

One electoral research group reported that the Pirates won slightly above average support from workers and white collar employees (eight percent), while just four percent of civil servants voted for the party. According to educational status the party received a twelve percent level of support from “Arbitur” students, nine percent from middle school students, eight percent from high school students and four percent from students with a degree.

The protest character of the vote for the Pirates is also revealed by an examination of the important issues in the election. Twenty-seven percent of voters declared they were motivated by issues related to the Internet, and 21 percent by “educational policy”—two themes close to the heart of the Pirates—but 40 percent declared they were concerned about “social inequality”, an issue the Pirate party has never taken seriously. “Social inequality” or related terms do not even feature in the party’s election manifesto.

In general, the activities of the Saarland Pirate Party were characterised by political light-mindedness. Its manifesto was decided upon two weeks before the election in summary proceedings at a conference held over a single weekend. The manifesto reads like a shopping list of very diverse demands, such as for “joint custody rights for parents”, “the withdrawal of the current ordinance for packaging procedure”, or a “ban on wild animals in circuses.”.

One of the party’s four new deputies, Michael Neyses, joined the party just four months before the elections. The party’s leading candidate, Jasmin Maurer, is 22 years old and known mainly for her animal rights activities.

The party approached its election campaign as a public relations opportunity and aimed to appeal to the broadest

layers of the electorate. It was able to rely on the benevolent support of a majority of the media. As was the case with the election held in Berlin last September, the Pirates put up placards featuring slogans which did not appear in their election manifesto. “Put people before markets”, for example, appears ridiculous when one considers that the only social demand raised by the party was the call for a minimum wage of €8.50, argued on the basis that this serves to motivate employees. The absence of such a minimum wage leads to “distortion” in the jobs market, the party insisted.

The fact that such a hollow campaign could find a certain resonance and an organisation like the Pirate Party could enter the state parliament casts a sharp light on the state of the political establishment. With official policies increasingly dictated by the banks and corporations, elections have become more and more a completely arbitrary process.

The increasingly undemocratic nature of German politics is itself the product of deeper social and economic processes. The fiscal pact agreed in Europe and the massive bailout of the banks has led to a vast redistribution of social wealth from the bottom of society to the top, impoverishing broad layers of the population on the way. Such a class policy is incompatible with democracy. In two European countries (Greece and Italy), the EU has already imposed non-elected, so-called technocratic regimes.

It is not merely organizations like the Pirates that are able to take root in such a situation—they actually serve an important function for the ruling elite. By propagating the message that democracy is essentially a question of transparency to be enforced by some technical changes in the way in which parliamentary politics is carried out, the party masks and denies the class character of society. While attacks on social gains and democratic rights are being intensified across Europe on behalf of a layer of the super-rich, the fate of society, the Pirates argue, depends on “liquid feedback” and the possibility of video broadcasts for parliamentary sessions.

This ignorance and indifference to broader social issues has its roots in the social base of the Pirates. While the party was originally founded mainly by young people and Internet activists, it now represents a well-heeled clientele.

A glimpse at its Saarland election program demonstrates the real social interests the party represents. While many points are formulated in very general terms, the party explicitly expresses its commitment to the constitutional debt brake which is used by all parties to justify massive cuts in social spending.

The program states: “The goal of a balanced budget without new borrowing has top priority for us in terms of a sustainable, future-oriented economic policy.” These funds, the Pirates argue, should be saved in the administration, which should be organized more efficiently—in other words, via layoffs.

One funding area the party does not want to cut, but rather to enhance: the “material and human resources” for the police. While this defence of the state appears illogical for a party that proclaims it upholds the rights of freedom, it is, in fact, entirely in keeping with the party’s defence of the capitalist economic system and its resulting social inequality. The social misery and anger produced by savings and redundancies must be kept under control by the police.

The Saar Pirates are increasingly adopting right-wing positions on the party’s core issues. For example, in the case of popular referendums the party calls for such votes to be permitted only when five percent of the population signal their support and only for issues involving less than 0.5 percent of the state budget. Although the party program addresses a huge range of topics, it says nothing about the measures used by federal and state agencies to spy via the Internet on political dissidents.

The logic of this type of opportunism points clearly to the desire of the Pirates to share power at a local and federal level. After the elections, Jan Niklas Fingerle from the Pirate state committee told the dapd news agency that the party would not exclude the possibility of participating in a federal government. He was not prepared to restrict himself to any definite prognosis regarding coalition partners: “We will talk to all the democratic parties; we are ruling nothing out.”



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