

Left Party collapse in North Rhine-Westphalia vote

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The Left Party suffered a punishing defeat in the election held in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) last weekend. The party lost more than half of its support, plummeting from 5.6 percent at the last state election in 2010 to just 2.5 percent on Sunday. The party's failure to cross the 5 percent threshold means it will no longer participate in the state parliament.

The election campaign conducted by the Left Party was entirely cynical, and the party paid the price. Although the party played a crucial role in permitting the sitting state administration—a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party—to implement a series of anti-social policies, the Left Party acted as if it had played some sort of opposition role for the last 18 months.

After coming to power in 2012, the SPD and the Greens lacked an overall majority and relied on support from the Left Party to implement the coalition's budget cuts in 2010 and 2011. In its election campaign, the Left Party boasted of its alleged successes and gave as examples the abolition of tuition fees, the expansion of day care, and especially the state staff representation law. It did not mention the measures it supported that attacked the living standards and rights of the working class.

In fact, the expansion of day care centres was not based on an initiative of the Left Party, but was rather the result of a decision by the state constitutional court, which ruled in October 2010 that the previous state government had failed to provide sufficient nursery places for under-three-year-olds.

Tuition fees were abolished, but no alternative method of funding has been established, resulting in a significant loss of finances for the state's universities and colleges. This has led to a marked reduction in the quality of teaching and job losses on the part of academic staff. In addition, the Higher Education Act was not repealed, which means that the universities are increasingly dependent on outside business

sponsors. This represents a fundamental attack on academic freedom and the autonomy of universities.

The role of the Left Party is exemplified in its support for the supplementary budget of 2010 and the state budget of 2011. The party supported the administration in practice while making some verbal jabs against it. At party conferences and in resolutions, the Left Party leadership repeatedly emphasised that they were not inclined to support the budget proposals of the SPD-Green minority government, but at the same time regarded their refusal to consent as “counterproductive”.

In 2011, the Left Party voted in favour of the state budget, although the party's own state executive warned that the draft budget would lead to cuts in social spending, the privatisation of public utilities and job losses in the local communities.

The budget contained cuts totalling more than €600 million (US\$765 million). The state executive of the Left Party came to the conclusion that the “clear rejection by the SPD-Green minority government of constructive cooperation with the Left Party must have consequences”. This did not prevent the Left Party, however, from abstaining in the crucial vote, thereby allowing the budgets to be passed in parliament.

Afterwards, the Left Party fraction head Wolfgang Zimmermann commented that the SPD-Green budget is “disappointing” and that “there had been no real change of policy on the Rhine and Ruhr”.

The Left Party continued this cynical game in 2012, as a statement from the state executive makes clear. The Left Party rejected the proposed budget, which provided for further cuts amounting to €750 million, but did not rule out further cooperation.

The “modest and realisable demands on the SPD and the

Greens”—such as the introduction of a social ticket for the unemployed, additional staff in kindergartens and child care, and a slight increase in social housing provision—”were negotiable for the Left Party. We have always stressed this in talks with the provincial government and the factions of the SPD and the Greens”, the statement reads.

The Left also contributed to ensuring that cuts in public service were imposed as smoothly as possible. This was the role played by the staff representation law.

The Left Party argued that the measure would strengthen the participation of white-collar workers and public administration employees in their places of work. In fact, the law only serves to strengthen the hand of the trade union bureaucracy, which has played a leading role in the state in imposing the attacks on workers embodied in the budget cuts.

The Staff Representation Act also permits the Left Party to serve its own clientele. The law secures posts for union officials at a state and local level. It is no coincidence that almost all Left Party candidates and members of parliament are active members of either the public service union Verdi or the teachers’ union, the GEW.

The party’s close links to the trade union bureaucracy are also reflected in a resolution drawn up on the situation at the Opel plant in Bochum, which is threatened with closure. With a sideswipe at the capitalist free market, the statement declares: “Opel is not an isolated case, but the result of an economic system that produces only for profit and not for personal use. This has disastrous consequences for humans and the environment. “

The conclusion, according to the Left Party, is that federal and state authorities should step up their involvement in the company and prevent the closure of the Bochum factory with the help of employees. The party fails to explain why the same state that is carrying through massive cuts in social spending should suddenly change direction and provide support for the local auto industry.

The dismal political balance sheet of the Left Party in the state is also clear from a brochure titled “Left works”, which notes that the party had managed to rename one room in the state parliament building after a former local Communist Party leader. For Wolfgang Zimmermann, the party’s crowning success was a speech he made at a union rally titled, “Implement a change of policy now”.

When it came to its demands on the state administration,

the Left was unable to prevail. In the budget debate in 2011, the Left Party raised a total of 87 amendments, all of which were rejected by the administration.

Now, the Left Party in NRW is left picking up the pieces. It was completely surprised by the sudden decision of the SPD to dissolve the parliament and call new elections.

The state association has been deeply shaken. Prior to the election result, Left Party leading candidate and spokesperson Catherine Schwabedissen told the online newspaper *Der Westen* that the party’s district organisations were insufficiently active, the party leadership defied existing party structures, and there had been “a failure to systematically build the party at a local level”.

Party membership has shrunk by 1,100 to just 7,900 members. In one district, the entire party local transferred membership to the Pirate Party, and factional divisions have been reported across the state.

Up until the end, the Left Party continued to claim it could bring the SPD back into a more socially acceptable fold. Schwabedissen told the *Westfalen-Blatt* she could imagine a coalition with the SPD—”if the content was right.” She regards the main task of the Left Party after the election as exerting pressure on the SPD-Green government. This is despite the fact that the SPD and the Greens have already announced they plan to make budget cuts in 2013 totalling €1 billion.

The main unifying factor in the Left Party is the shared fear of an independent working class movement. In this respect, its candidates can draw on considerable experience in the repression of social protests and the sell-out of labour disputes. This applies especially to Wolfgang Zimmermann, a former local chairman of Verdi, and Gunhild Böth, a member of the executive committee of the GEW.

The Left Party’s efforts to play the role of a left cover to the state government has been duly recognised by the electorate, which voted the party out of power on Sunday. The crisis of the party in NRW will only intensify the already sharp factional differences inside the federal party.



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