

Germany: State election in North Rhine-Westphalia offers workers no choice

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12 May 2012

On Sunday, the most populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) elects a new parliament. The state election involves about a fifth of the German population. The state parliament was dissolved prematurely because the Social Democratic Party-Green Party minority government under Prime Minister Hannelore Kraft (SPD) failed to gain a majority for its budget. Previously, it had usually relied on the votes of the Left Party.

All polls are predicting a clear victory for the SPD. Whether the SPD and the Greens can win the majority they are seeking, however, depends on the performance of the smaller parties. Above all, the almost certain arrival of the Pirate Party in the state parliament could endanger an SPD-Green majority. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), whose lead candidate Christian Lindner is regarded as a challenger to the national chair Philip Rössler, is again polling more than 5 percent, the level required to secure parliamentary representation. On the other hand, it is likely that the Left Party will fail to re-enter the Düsseldorf parliament.

NRW is deeply marked by the economic crisis. Extreme poverty is prevalent in parts of the Ruhr area that never recovered from the decline of the steel and mining industries. But for the workers, there is no real choice in Sunday's state election. All parties are competing to see who can cut public spending most effectively.

The SPD-Green minority government had provoked the elections in March with a parliamentary manoeuvre, hoping to gain a more stable majority government for the upcoming social attacks. Both the SPD and Greens have declared that they will comply with the statutory debt ceiling and will reduce the deficit to zero by 2020.

In a response to readers of *Handelsblatt*, Kraft boasted of already reducing the budget deficit to €620 million in 2011."Our draft budget for 2012 provided for additional savings of €750 million and benchmarks for 2013 of just over €1 billion."

The increase in receipts demanded by Kraft and other party representatives in the party programme, in interviews and public discussions, are campaign promises that no one intends to realise. Decisions regarding the taxation of the wealthy and inheritances, the higher taxation of top earners, the tax on financial transactions and the like are taken not at state but at federal level. Many of these taxes were abolished during the 1998 to 2005 rule of the SPD and the Greens, who are now calling for their reintroduction.

Regarding financial matters that directly affect the state, Kraft was very concrete in *Handelsblatt*: "We also need to consider what tasks the state can relinquish in the future. To this end, we have deployed an efficiency team that is examining the budget for those posts".

Kraft bases her cuts policies on the trade unions and works councils throughout the state. She made North Rhine-Westphalia German Trade Union Federation (DGB) chair Guntram Schneider her labour minister. The amendment to the "State Personnel Representation Act" of 2011 helped the unions and works councils in the public sector to play a role in implementing the cuts. The preceding CDU-FDP government of Jürgen Rüttgers had curtailed the trade unions' participation rights in 2007.

The CDU, FDP and the Left Party also supported the budget cuts of the SPD and Greens. In their election campaigns, the CDU and FDP present Kraft as the "Queen of Debt" and demand even more stringent austerity measures.

The Left Party justifies its existence by arguing that it could force the SPD to implement its election pledges. In 2010 and 2011, the Left Party supported the budgets proposed by the SPD-Green minority government, ensuring Kraft had a majority. The Left Party was also the mainstay of the SPD-Green minority government on other issues, voting with them almost 300 times in the first year.

The Pirate Party has already announced its support for a

new SPD-Green government under Kraft, depending on the issue. In a position paper on fiscal policy, it has expressly advocated “sound budgetary policies and fiscal discipline.” This also includes “a balanced state budget”. This is a barely concealed commitment to the debt ceiling and massive cuts in social spending.

The elections in NRW have often set the course for federal politics. In 1966, for example, the SPD-FDP state government under Social Democrat Heinz Kühn prepared the way for an SPD-FDP coalition at federal level in 1969, led by Willy Brandt. In 1995, the SPD-Green state government under Johannes Rau (SPD) foreshadowed the federal electoral victory of the SPD and Greens under Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens) in 1998. And in 2005, the defeat of the SPD in NRW heralded the premature end of the coalition at the federal level. For this reason, the state elections in NRW are often referred to as the “little federal election”.

The SPD and Greens hope that following an election win in NRW, they will be back in charge of the federal government by autumn 2013 at the latest. While they fully support the austerity measures and social cuts of the Merkel government, they are trying to create the illusion that this can be combined with investments in economic programmes, education, research, culture, etc. On closer inspection, however, the “Growth Pact” they are demanding is revealed as a further deregulation of the labour markets.

When the CDU’s lead candidate, Federal Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen, said earlier this week that the state elections should be seen as a vote on Chancellor Angela Merkel’s (CDU) austerity measures in Europe, the Berlin CDU headquarters responded with panic. Röttgen had to withdraw his remarks. Merkel does not want the bad election result looming for her protégé Röttgen to be understood as a vote against her austerity measures.

NRW, with its 18 million people, is deeply divided socially. Unemployment and poverty are concentrated especially in the north of the Ruhr. For outsiders, a trip on the local train through the northern Ruhr area from Dortmund, via Castrop-Rauxel, Herne, Wanne-Eickel, Gelsenkirchen, Altenessen and Oberhausen to Duisburg can be a shock: dilapidated stations and industrial sites, derelict and dilapidated neighbourhoods on a route of around 70 kilometres.

Almost all the local municipalities in NRW are highly indebted. Few of the nearly 400 cities and towns have a balanced budget. Kraft’s state government adopted a

“pact for strengthening city finances” that was supposedly in the interests of local communities. But its effects speak a different language. The debt-ridden communities are only granted “relief funds” when they enforce drastic cuts.

The city of Duisburg, which would receive a one-off payment of €52 million (US\$67 million) under the present pact, must save some €80 million annually in return. In the last week, the Duisburg city government has submitted savings proposals that reveal the election slogans of the SPD as lies.

The savings listed include the cutting of a further 275 jobs (680 had already been agreed on); the closure of 5 of the 13 branch libraries; the closure of the library bus service, three swimming pools, and two refugee camps, and the ending of language development in kindergartens; and the rise of charges for adult education and in kindergarten fees (the latter because of the requirements of the state government). Subsidies for public transport will be cancelled; assistance will be ended for AIDS counselling services and mental health charities.

In the field of culture, €7 million will be saved through ending the decades-long partnership with the Opera house on the Rhein in Düsseldorf. In the medium term, this is not only a cultural loss, but the lack of guest appearances also endangers the jobs of those employed at the theatre and the widely known Duisburg Philharmonic.

The administration also hopes to make further savings by putting increased pressure on the poorest: the Social Welfare Office will be cracking down on benefit recipients. In the social services department, which now only pays out legally required benefits, however, a total of €8.5 million could be saved.

This is the SPD-Green “alternative” to the austerity policies of the CDU and FDP, as are being implemented by Chancellor Merkel in Germany and Europe. For workers, it is the choice between a rock and a hard place.



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