

German parties shift to the right ahead of state elections

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5 March 2016

Elections in the German states of Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt on March 13 are being described as a “small federal election” and viewed as a barometer of political sentiment. In total, 12 million voters will have an opportunity to cast a ballot.

The three states are governed by different coalitions of the main bourgeois parties. As the first Green state premier, Winfried Kretschmann in Baden-Württemberg heads a coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD). In Rheinland-Palatinate, the relations are reversed, with Malu Dreyer (SPD) leading a coalition with the Greens. In Saxony-Anhalt, state premier Reiner Haseloff of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) heads a “grand coalition” with the SPD.

There are no essential points of difference between these parties. They are in full agreement on all fundamental issues and stress this at every opportunity. This coalescence into a united federal German party is a response to the deepening economic and social crisis as well as the intensification of militarism and the drive to war. The entire political apparatus is shifting further to the right and confronts the population with increased aggressiveness and hostility.

This is made very clear in Baden-Württemberg. Five years ago, the Greens brought 58 years of CDU rule to an end, which was celebrated as sensational and a major political turning point. Today, the Greens under Kretschmann are conducting an election campaign in the style of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Kretschmann has evoked considerable enthusiasm in conservative voting circles. He backs Merkel’s refugee policy. At election campaign rallies he frequently declares that, as a practicing Catholic, he prays every day that Merkel sticks to her “European solution” and does not bow to critics within her own party.

This “European solution” to the refugee crisis is merely a euphemism for the sealing off of the borders of fortress Europe and increased deportations to so-called safe countries of origin. Kretschmann personally ensured in the Bundesrat, Germany’s upper house of parliament which represents state governments directly, that several Balkan states were designated safe countries of origin, so as allow immediate deportations to them. He intends to achieve the same outcome with regards to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Kretschmann has also adopted a right-wing, conservative standpoint on other issues. Five years ago, the Greens won support among young voters because they backed protests against the rebuilding of Stuttgart’s main train station. Immediately after the election, the Kretschmann government organised a referendum. After this produced a result in favour of the project, his administration determinedly pushed forward with the multi-billion rebuilding of the train station.

In a full-page article, *Die Zeit* praised the “steadfastness of this Moses from Sigmaringen,” as Kretschmann is “affectionately called” in Baden-Württemberg, because he had led the Greens “into the promised land of the people’s parties.” This was a reference to making the Greens competitive with the SPD and CSU, as they had the support of 30.5 percent in a recent state poll. *Die Zeit* hailed him for standing up to his former protest allies over the train station, recalling his statement, “I promised a civil society and not a paradise for citizens.” As a result, the weekly newspaper gushed, “Winfried Kretschmann is not only the most popular state premier by far in the Republic,” he is “simply the better conservative, and his party the better CDU.”

Although Kretschmann governs with the SPD, he is

considered as someone clearing the path for Green cooperation with the CDU. He personifies the rightward evolution of an entire social layer of former petty-bourgeois radicals, who are no different today than right-wing conservative politicians.

Kretschmann's career led him from the Maoist Communist League of West Germany (KBW) to the post of official in the environment ministry of the Hesse state government led by Joschka Fischer and finally the position of state premier in Stuttgart. He maintains close ties to leading corporations, particularly Daimler and Porsche, the automakers in Baden-Württemberg, as well as business organisations.

Another leading Green spokesman and supporter of collaboration with the CDU is Boris Palmer, mayor of Tübingen. Under the slogan "more realism in the refugee debate," he has encouraged racism and anti-immigrant sentiments. Palmer asserted that the "boat was full," the capacity to accept refugees was overstretched, more countries had to be defined as safe countries of origin and more refugees quickly deported.

In addition, he argued, it was a mistake to pay money instead of benefits in kind to refugees in reception centres, because this acted as an incentive and had resulted in increased refugee numbers from the Balkans. He claimed the influx of refugees was producing a "dangerously explosive social situation." The EU's borders had to be immediately closed and in emergency cases secured by fences and armed European border guards.

The SPD is of course fully involved in this all-party coalition. At the federal level, it has pushed through restrictive asylum laws. "There are limits to our capacity to take in refugees," said SPD parliamentary fraction leader Thomas Oppermann. SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel spoke of practical limits to the "capacities of cities and municipalities" and demanded, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, that refugees had to adapt to the "dominant culture."

With repugnant racist undertones, Gabriel called for a social pact for the German population. It could no longer be tolerated that the impression existed that there was unlimited money for foreigners available, while for the German population there was only cuts and austerity measures.

Such right-wing, racist declarations play directly into the hands of the far-right parties, the Alternative for

Germany (AfD) and Pegida. Gabriel's interview a year ago with *Stern* magazine is still well remembered. In that interview, he responded to the question of whether the Islamophobic Pegida movement belonged to Germany by declaring, "Of course. Whether one likes it or not, there is a democratic right to be right-wing or a German nationalist."

These deliberate efforts to legitimise fascist conceptions have been seized upon and driven by the media. Hardly a day goes by without the appearance of right-wing demagogues from Pegida or the AfD in media interviews, and they are also given prime-time slots on television to spread their racist propaganda.

As at the end of the Weimar Republic, when right-wing conservative and German nationalist politicians played a critical role in the transfer of power to Hitler, efforts are being made today to channel the growing opposition to unending social cuts, growing unemployment and poverty in a racist direction.

This is why according to projections in polls, the AfD will enter state parliaments in all three states. In Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD is even ahead of the SPD with 17 percent support in the polls. The SPD is threatened with a collapse to 15 percent.

The political shift to the right looming in the March 13 election is not the result of broad right-wing sentiments in the population, as the media tirelessly proclaims. In reality, this rightward shift takes place within the political elite, while the vast majority of the population are turning their backs on the entire political apparatus in disgust. The largest party in all elections over recent years has been that of the non-voters, who could find no outlet for their opposition to all of the political parties.



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