

What is behind the electoral success of the Alternative for Germany?

Peter Schwarz
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Many people have reacted with horror to the success of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in last Sunday's German state elections. The right-wing party, which combines national-conservative and fascist positions, won 24 percent of the vote in the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt. It also secured representation in the parliaments of Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Palatinate, obtaining 15 and 13 percent of the vote, respectively.

Not all AfD voters are racists or fascists. According to polls, only one quarter backed the AfD because they were in agreement with it, while three quarters did so as a protest against the established parties.

The established parties and the media have systematically promoted the AfD. They responded to the wave of sympathy and active assistance to refugees from the war-devastated Middle East last summer by giving the AfD a platform and spreading fear and xenophobia. A central role was played by the media's claims of mass assaults on women by refugees during New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne. It has since become clear that the alleged events were either wildly exaggerated or, more likely, never happened.

This campaign has continued unabated in the aftermath of Sunday's elections. Led by Christian Social Union leader Horst Seehofer and the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the demand is being raised that the political establishment listen to the "voice of the people" and shift its refugee policy even further to the right. As if the 1.3 million of the 12.6 million people eligible to vote who cast ballots for the AfD represented the entire people.

The AfD's rise represents a real danger. Its result in Saxony-Anhalt is the best achieved by a far-right party since the downfall of the Nazi regime 71 years ago. To combat this danger, it is necessary to understand its cause. This demands an answer to the question of why, under conditions of a deep social and political crisis, the right

wing rather than the left is on the offensive.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the global capitalist system has been moving ever more rapidly towards the abyss. Like a drug addict, it is being kept alive only by constant infusions of credit into the banks and equity markets. An increasing number of countries are being engulfed by war, with millions killed and millions more transformed into refugees. Bourgeois democracy is giving way to authoritarianism.

Poverty, unemployment and inequality have dramatically increased since the financial crisis. Saturday's edition of *Der Spiegel* was titled, "The divided nation: Germany 2016—the rich get richer, the poor remain poor." The lead article details the gulf that has emerged in wealth, income and quality of life. Life expectancy for a boy from the lower classes is ten years less than that of someone the same age from the upper class. In education-linked mobility, i.e., the opportunity for social advancement, Germany is among the lowest placed of all industrial nations.

For a long time, it was taken for granted that social and economic crises produced a radicalisation that strengthened the parties of the left. Not so today, and Germany is not alone. In France, the National Front is on the rise. In Eastern Europe, far-right parties are in power, such as Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS. In the United States, Donald Trump has a good chance of becoming the presidential candidate of the Republican Party.

This development is not due to a lack of left-wing sentiment. Rather, it is the result of the role played by parties that are considered "left" or that describe themselves as such. In Germany, there are millions of workers, youth and middle-class people who despise the AfD and follow the rightward trajectory of politics with disgust. But they lack a political voice.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), which in the post-

war period was seen as the party of the ordinary worker and of social reform, now serves the function of providing the right-wing Christian Democratic Union with a governing majority. The party's name is inseparably associated with the Hartz laws, the greatest assault on past social gains in decades.

The role of the Left Party was revealingly acknowledged in a joint analysis of the election results published by Left Party parliamentary deputies Sevim Dagdelen, Alexander Ulrich and Heike Hänsel. They identified the party's defence of Angela Merkel's policies and its failure to address the social crisis as the cause of its massive losses.

This is an accurate assessment of the Left Party's politics. They are indistinguishable from the policies of the conservative German chancellor and just as anti-social. In every German state where the Left Party has been in government, it has cut spending and laid off workers even more ruthlessly than the other bourgeois parties.

The aim of the Left Party is not to build a left-wing movement against capitalism, but to prevent such a development. The very idea that this party of political functionaries, state officials, trade union bureaucrats and privileged representatives of the middle class could mobilise the social anger of the working class and the rebellious spirit of the youth against capitalism is absurd.

The Left Party and the various pseudo-left groups that operate in its ranks or on its fringes bear chief responsibility for the rise of the AfD. Since the founding 26 years ago of the Left Party and its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), it has sought to capture all social protest with left-sounding rhetoric only to lead it into a blind alley. This has created the conditions for a right-wing party such as the AfD to channel social frustration and anger to its own advantage.

The reactionary role of the Left Party in Germany is also part of an international phenomenon. Greece's Syriza, with which the Left Party closely cooperates, has shown what such parties are capable of. Carried to power on a wave of popular opposition to the European union's austerity dictates, it accepted and implemented an even more brutal austerity programme. It acts today as the gatekeeper for the EU's policy of barring refugees. The danger that the fascists will benefit from these policies is enormous.

The Left Party and Syriza, and similar groups such as Podemos in Spain, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, and the International Socialist Organisation in the

United States, are not left-wing, but pseudo-left organisations. They are right-wing tendencies of the upper-middle class, concealing their right-wing policies with left phraseology. In his book *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, David North writes that the pseudo-left utilizes "populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class."

North goes on to explain that the pseudo-left is "anti-Marxist" and "anti-socialist," and that it "opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society." It "promotes 'identity politics'... to effect a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population. The pseudo-left seeks greater access to, rather than the destruction of, social privilege."

The betrayal of Syriza in Greece has confirmed the unbridgeable chasm separating the pseudo-left from the broad masses of working people. This chasm is also evident in the huge losses of the Left Party in the midst of a deep social and political crisis.

The period in which such parties were able to suppress the class struggle is coming to an end. The state elections on Sunday and the associated crisis of the established parties point to a period of violent social and political conflicts.

Sections of the working class and youth will reorient and seek a genuine socialist direction. But this is not an automatic process. It requires the conscious intervention of a Marxist party. The building of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International is now the most urgent task.



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