

German state election in North-Rhine Westphalia: The devastating balance sheet of the SPD-Green government

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Elections to the legislature in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), will be held May 14. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, who have governed there since 2010 under state premier Hannelore Kraft (SPD), are implementing massive social cuts. Until 2012, the Left Party had served to secure the so-called "red-green" minority government with a majority, which is why it was thrown out of the state parliament in the 2012 elections.

Traditionally, the NRW election is of great significance for federal politics as well. The state is home to more than 13 million voters, one-fifth of the German electorate. Not infrequently, events in NRW set the stage for developments at the federal level.

The SPD-FDP (Free Democratic Party) state coalition under the Social Democrat Heinz Kühn in 1966 prepared the coming to power of the SPD-FDP federal coalition under Willy Brandt in 1969. In 1995, the red-green state government under Johannes Rau (SPD) foreshadowed the electoral victory of the SPD and Greens at federal level under the leadership of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens) in 1998. In 2005, the defeat of the SPD in NRW led to the premature end of the federal coalition. For this reason, the regional elections in NRW are often referred to as "a smaller-scale Bundestag [federal parliament] election."

At present, state politics in NRW show above all how the anti-social policies of the SPD and the Greens are repelling more and more voters, and opening the way for right-wing political parties. The SPD has determined state politics in NRW since 1966; its reign was interrupted for only five years by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-FDP government under premier Jürgen Rüttgers (2005-2010). Since 1995, the Greens have been involved in all SPD state governments in NRW.

The rapid social decline, the neglect of many cities and regions, high unemployment and growing poverty in the Ruhr, and the intensified crisis in the education system are the result of red-green state policies.

According to opinion polls, the current government of Hannelore Kraft (SPD) and her deputy state premier Sylvia Löhrmann (Greens) will be punished in the election on 14 May.

Five years ago, the SPD won 39.1 percent of the vote and the Greens 11.3 percent. In recent surveys by "Infratest dimap", the SPD is only polling about 34 percent and the Greens could fail to clear the 5 percent hurdle required for entry into the state parliament. Instead, the vote for the CDU, with its right-wing law-and-order programme, could increase by almost 10 percent and the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) could rise to more than 20 percent in the region's social hotspots.

This growth of the right is a direct result of the SPD's rightward shift, resting on the trade unions in its social attacks. It was no accident that immediately after coming to power in 2010, Hannelore Kraft made the NRW German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) chairman Guntram Schneider her labour minister. The current Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Rainer Schmeltzer, was also a long-standing public sector trade union functionary and NRW regional chairman of the SPD's Working Group on Employee Affairs.

Since the beginning of the nineties, the membership of the SPD in NRW has more than halved. It has hemorrhaged members among workers and the poor. Its strongholds in the "beating heart of the SPD," as the Ruhr area was called for a long time, have long ceased to exist. With its turn away from the working class, the rightward development of the SPD accelerated. It became the party of a self-indulgent and arrogant upper layer, no longer concerned with the growing poverty and distress of the population.

A similar transformation also took place in the trade unions. They reacted to the globalization of production by turning into co-managers. To improve the competitiveness of "their own" employers, they blackmailed workers and implemented wage and social cuts.

A classic example is the closure of the Opel plant in Bochum, which was implemented by the IG Metall union three years ago and supported by the SPD state labour minister and former DGB chief. The lingering decline of the Opel factory in Bochum is symbolic of the waning of social democratic politics.

Only a short time ago, the ailing SPD in NRW had benefited

from the media hype surrounding the party's candidate for chancellor in this autumn's federal elections, Martin Schulz, and was leading in the polls. But like its superficial reform proposals, the "successes" claimed by the SPD and the Greens in the election campaign are proving to be illusions or are simply false.

The Social Democrats and the Greens have kept their word on only one issue: They have cut back the state budget to the bone. "The consolidation of the state budget is our goal," they announced in 2012. The SPD now praises as a success the fact that of the 138 cities in the state that were under budgetary constraint in 2010—i.e., under the financial supervision of the respective district administration—only nine remain in this situation.

The price for this has been very high: cities have been subject to rigorous austerity measures which have reduced all the services provided by the municipalities to the legally prescribed minimum. The result is social impoverishment and the collapse of the infrastructure. In addition, huge sums of money have been cut in the cities and municipalities at the expense of the workers and residents who are paying with limited public services.

The Kraft government, supported by the Greens, the Left Party and the trade unions, is responsible for an unprecedented degree of impoverishment, especially in the Ruhr area. In this still industrialized region with its more than 5 million inhabitants, the unemployment rate is above 15 or 20 percent or more, especially in the northern districts. One in three children in the Ruhr area—one in two in some districts—lives in a household dependent on the minimal "Hartz IV" welfare payments.

The Greens, who in the person of Education Minister Sylvia Löhrmann hold a central department, have implemented cuts throughout this area. "In no other federal state is so little money spent per pupil as in North Rhine-Westphalia," the Federal Statistical Office's educational financial report states. Teachers' workloads have grown considerably under the "red-green" state executive.

Also in another area that the Greens used to claim as their own—refugee policy—NRW takes a hard line towards people who have fled from war or faced expulsion. Hardly any other federal state carries out deportations as rigorously as NRW, including to Afghanistan. On April 25 in Bavaria, the fifth collective deportation took place from Germany to Afghanistan. According to the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior, three of the deportees came from Bavaria, one each from the states of Baden-Württemberg, Hamburg, Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate, and seven from North Rhine-Westphalia.

The Left Party in NRW would support this course if its votes were needed to do so. From 2010 to 2012, the Left Party in the NRW parliament had already agreed to all the social attacks demanded by the SPD and the Greens. Now, the party's federal parliamentary leader Sahra Wagenknecht can be seen on the

front page of the free election newspapers of the Left Party in NRW. At the height of the witch-hunt against refugees, Wagenknecht declared: "Whoever abuses their right to hospitality has forfeited their right to hospitality," garnering praise from AfD chief Alexander Gauland.

The Left Party is also linked to the trade unions through numerous ties. In the factories, it ensures that workers' opposition to the trade unions and their works council representatives is stifled.

Both the CDU and the AfD are deliberately exploiting the social decline. The CDU top candidate and regional chairman in NRW, Armin Laschet, is leading a "law-and-order" election campaign. For weeks, he has called for more powers for the police, more video surveillance, and the consistent deportation of asylum seekers who fall foul of the law. His election campaign is being conducted under the motto "zero tolerance." In its election brochures, the SPD counters by claiming it has trained almost twice as many police officers as the CDU state governments under Rüttgers and Laschet had done.

While the CDU focusses on calls for increasing state powers, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) tries to exploit unemployment and poverty, especially in the Ruhr area, to its advantage. It began its NRW election campaign in Essen in the beginning of April. Not only is poverty and unemployment higher here than elsewhere, a long-term Social Democrat, Guido Reil, is standing for the AfD. The trademark of this works council representative for the Mining, Chemical and Energy (IGBCE) trade union at the Prosper Haniel (Bottrop) coal mine is his agitation against refugees.

In NRW, it is clear how the right-wing, anti-social policy of the SPD, the Greens and the trade unions, supported by the Left Party, poisons the political climate and strengthens the AfD.

Workers and young people are being given no choice in the NRW election. The fight against unemployment and social cuts, as well as against the stepping up of state powers, war and right-wing radicalism, calls for an irreconcilable struggle against all the parties that support Hartz-IV—the SPD and Greens, Left Party and the trade unions—and the construction of a new socialist party.



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