

SPD vote plummets in Schleswig-Holstein state election in Germany

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10 May 2017

When the first projection of the vote in the state election in Schleswig-Holstein was announced on Sunday evening, the reaction in Willy-Brandt-Haus (SPD headquarters) in Berlin was one of horror. While pollsters had predicted the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) running neck-and-neck, the SPD hoped two factors would ensure it retained power: the advantage of incumbency for state premier Torsten Albig, who has governed the state for five years in an alliance with the Greens and the South Schleswig Voters Association (SSW), and the so-called “Schulz effect” following the nomination of Martin Schulz as the SPD’s candidate for chancellor in the autumn federal election.

However, both factors failed. The SPD lost 3.2 percentage points of its previous vote, and with 27.2 percent, recorded its second worst result ever in the federal state. The SPD was outstripped by the CDU, whose lead candidate is a political newcomer, unknown only a few months ago. The CDU obtained 32 percent (adding 1.2 points from its previous vote). Its increased vote reflected a rejection of the policies of the SPD rather than agreement with the CDU’s program.

The rejection of the SPD was unable to find any progressive expression, instead strengthening the conservatives and far-right parties. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) was able to increase its vote by 3.3 percent on the basis of an explicitly neo-liberal economic program, winning 11.5 percent. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to exceed the five percent mark necessary for representation in parliament with 5.9 percent at the first attempt in the state. The AfD is now represented in 12 of Germany’s 16 state parliaments.

Although the Left Party increased its vote by 1.5 percentage points, with 3.8 percent it failed to clear the

five percent threshold to gain entry to the state legislature. In 2009, the Left Party had won 6 percent and had six deputies in the state parliament. However, due to its complete adaptation to the right-wing policies of the SPD, it lost almost two-thirds of its vote five years ago, dropping to 2.3 percent. That result, the party declared, was due to the emergence of the Pirate Party, which had won 8.2 percent. Last Sunday, the Pirates lost 7 points off their previous total and are no longer represented in the state parliament. The Left Party was unable to profit, however, from their decline.

The election result in Schleswig-Holstein is very significant for federal politics. For the second time in a row, the so-called Schulz-effect has failed to materialize in a state election. The election in the state of Saarland in March already made clear that the brief upswing in the opinion polls following the selection of Martin Schulz as the SPD’s chancellor candidate was the product of media hype and was completely out of touch with reality. The euphoria around Schulz, which dominated the media this spring, had nothing to do with popular opinion but was manufactured to prepare for a change of government at federal level.

After the nomination of Martin Schulz as the SPD’s lead candidate at the end of January, not a day passed without a gushing commentary in the press celebrating him as the “renewer of social democracy” and a “new hope for liberal democracy.” In February, Schulz announced an “election campaign for social justice,” claiming in countless interviews and talk shows that the worst mistakes of the Hartz welfare and labor “reforms” and Agenda 2010 cuts would have to be corrected.

In mid-March, he was elected chairman of the SPD at a special party conference, receiving 100 percent of the delegates’ votes. The WSWS wrote at the time, “This

[kind of election outcome] has never taken place in the long history of the SPD and was even unusual in the history of Stalinist East Germany (GDR). Even SED leader Honecker allowed a one or two percent margin to give the impression that the party allowed dissenting opinions."

Now voters have once again confirmed that the euphoria surrounding Schulz was cooked up by the media. Rather, the SPD is being seen as what it is: the party which introduced the Hartz laws and Agenda 2010, the party responsible for a dramatic worsening of social conditions in working-class areas, not only in Schleswig-Holstein but nation-wide.

The SPD is also rightly regarded as being directly linked with the growing trend towards war and military rearmament. In its alliance with the Greens in 1999, the SPD deployed the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) in their first foreign intervention following World War II and is now aggressively implementing military rearmament.

Since the election defeat in Schleswig-Holstein, the SPD leadership has been gripped by alarm. If this trend continues next Sunday in the state election in North-Rhine Westfalia, Germany's most populous state, and the SPD faces defeat in its stronghold, the party will have hardly any chance in the federal election in September.

Schulz and the SPD have responded to their electoral debacle and the enmity of the working class by throwing themselves further into the arms of big business and the financial elite.

On Monday, the party chairman gave a speech on economic policy to hundreds of managers at a meeting of the Berlin Chamber of Industry and Commerce. He assured the assembled businessmen and top executives that he was one of them and would not introduce any policies against the interests of big business. There would be no prohibitive electoral promises from him.

Business daily *Handelsblatt* quoted Schulz saying there were two dangers in the campaign for this autumn's federal election: "unrealizable social promises and unrealizable promises of tax cuts. I will not make either."

Schulz did, however, promise his key guideline would be making "investment a priority," noting that there was "an investment gap of just under 140 billion euros in the municipalities in Germany." Last week, an SPD working paper was put forward pledging to

promote medium-sized businesses in particular. The policy focus of the paper is on measures to protect qualified personnel, promote innovation and provide targeted relief to medium-sized enterprises.

Schulz's speech to the business bosses was a clear rejection of his "election campaign for social justice," announced with great media effect. After voters clearly demonstrated that they do not believe his superficial bluster about reforms, Schulz struck back. A few days before the imminent election in Germany's most populous state, North-Rhine Westfalia, he has dropped all pretense of social reforms and revealed the true face of the SPD as a party of big business in the tradition of former SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

While the Greens in Schleswig-Holstein are preparing to join a possible coalition with the CDU and the FDP, the SPD is moving further to the right, driving more voters into the arms of the far-right AfD.



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