

Lessons from the North Rhein-Westphalia state election

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
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The election last Sunday in the German state of North Rhein-Westphalia (NRW) contains important lessons for future social conflicts and class struggles.

The election took place under conditions of mounting social tensions and a deepening international crisis. Social inequality is assuming ever more grotesque forms.

Millions of workers in Germany labour under precarious conditions, and more than a quarter of the population of some cities in the Ruhr region live below the poverty line, while a tiny elite has enriched itself to an unimaginable degree.

Since the assumption of power by Donald Trump in the United States, the danger of a nuclear war with Russia or China has grown. Germany's ruling elite has responded by undertaking a massive rearmament programme and returning to its old militarist traditions.

There is immense anger and outrage at these conditions. Poll after poll shows that the vast majority of the population opposes war and militarism. According to the recently published "Generation What?" study, 86 percent of young people in Germany believe that inequality is growing. Only 1 percent fully trusted politics, while 71 percent had no trust at all. Meanwhile, 42 percent said they would participate in an uprising against those in power if one developed in the near future.

But these sentiments find no expression in official politics. It is significant that the Social Democrats (SPD) effectively collapsed in NRW, achieving their worst result since 1947, with just 31.5 percent of the vote. When the coal industry went into terminal decline in the mid-1960s, the SPD rose to become the strongest party in NRW. Until the mid-1990s, its vote in the state election never fell below 45 percent, and sometimes rose above 50 percent.

But now it is justifiably seen as the party responsible for social misery: as the party of the Agenda 2010 reforms and the Hartz laws, which thrust millions of workers and their families into poverty and desperation; as the party of

the debt brake, which ruthlessly cuts spending at the state and municipal levels; as the party of the corrupt trade union apparatus, which organised the closure of steel and auto plants while smothering all opposition; and as the party of global military interventions and the strengthening of the state apparatus.

In recent weeks, the SPD completed the picture by criticizing Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen from the right, following troubling revelations about a far-right conspiracy in the army. The SPD's defence policy spokesman, Rainer Arnold, accused Von der Leyen of creating a climate of uncertainty and mistrust of the military, because she had suggested the possible existence of a right-wing conspiracy in the army without presenting any evidence.

The attempt to give the SPD a new face with Martin Schulz, and adorn it with the slogan of "social justice," has failed miserably. Apart from party functionaries, who fear for their lucrative posts and sinecures, nobody took the Schulz hype seriously. The SPD's defeat in NRW is the third in a row, coming after Saarland in March and Schleswig-Holstein a week ago.

The SPD has also dragged the Greens, which have long abandoned any association with appeals to social issues (insofar as they ever had any) and developed into the party of the arrogant, privileged middle class, into the abyss.

The Left Party failed to gain entry into the NRW state parliament. Although it gained 2.5 percentage points, this is extremely low, given the combined losses of the SPD, Greens and Pirate Party of 20 percent. The period in which this party could falsely portray itself as a left alternative to the SPD is over.

With Sahra Wagenknecht as the face of its campaign, the Left Party swung between the adoption of the Alternative for Germany's (AfD) anti-refugee agitation and appeals for a place at SPD leader Hannelore Kraft's

cabinet table. The news that the Left Party imposes cuts just as brutally as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD when in power, has long ago done the rounds.

The defeat of the SPD and Greens has resolved nothing. The beneficiaries were right-wing parties, which will continue the policies of social cuts, the strengthening of the state apparatus and militarism.

The CDU, which, to its own surprise, won the election, is now hoping for a fourth term in office for Angela Merkel after the federal election in September.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP), an anti-social lobbying front for the banks and major corporations, which seemed to have ceased to exist after its failure to win representation in the Bundestag four years ago, emerged as the third strongest party and is once again campaigning with its former arrogance.

The AfD, in its first election, won 7.4 percent of the vote, and in some impoverished areas, where social anger is especially strong, it secured double digit results. The lack of a progressive answer to the social crisis enables it to channel anger at the establishment parties in a reactionary, nationalist direction.

It is time for the working class to draw political lessons from these developments. The dangers connected with the rise of the far right cannot be underestimated. The discovery of a right-wing terrorist cell in the army, which was concealed by senior officers for years, shows that the ruling elite will not shrink from resorting to the methods of the Nazis to defend capitalism.

The period in which the working class could realise its interests through the ballot box is long gone. The Social Democrats and their allies in the trade unions are instruments of the ruling class. The latter see their task as being the defence of “location Germany,” i.e. the profits of German corporations, by continuously forcing down wage, pension and welfare benefit levels. Social democratic parties have collapsed in other countries as a result of these policies—including in Greece, Spain, and more recently, in the Netherlands and France.

After decades of social cuts, financial speculation and uninterrupted wars in the Middle East and Africa, the crisis of world capitalism has reached a point where progressive reforms are no longer possible. This is shown most clearly in the United States, where the criminal underworld has entered the White House in the person of Donald Trump, and the entire state apparatus finds itself in a deep crisis and riven by bitter infighting.

In Europe, the European Union and NATO, which for decades formed the basis for German foreign policy, are

breaking apart. Germany’s ruling class has responded by once again raising the claim to be the hegemon of Europe and a world power.

But the capitalist crisis also creates the conditions to overcome it. Millions of people reject war, militarism and capitalist exploitation. Major class battles are inevitable—but they must be politically prepared if they are not to end in catastrophe and defeat.

The working class must prepare to take over the control of society and reorganise the entire process of production along socialist lines. Instead of the profit interests and enrichment of a few, the economy must serve the requirements of society. Modern technology provides unimaginable possibilities for this.

The realisation of such a socialist programme requires an international perspective. Workers must unite across borders and fight jointly against the destruction of their rights and achievements, against war and the strengthening of the state.

Exactly a century ago, the Russian workers proved that it is possible to conquer state power, put an end to war and to reorganise society on the basis of socialist principles. The subsequent Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union does nothing to diminish the historic significance of the October Revolution of 1917.

The most important precondition to prepare for the coming class struggles and the realisation of a socialist programme is the building of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP). The SGP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International are the only organisations in the world today fighting for a socialist response to the global capitalist crisis. The building of the SGP is the most urgent task arising out of the bankruptcy of the Social Democrats and the trade unions.



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