

The rise of the AfD and the rightward lurch of official politics in Germany

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For the first time since the fall of the Nazis, a right-wing extremist party is entering Germany's national parliament. With 13 percent of the vote in Sunday's federal election, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the third largest party in parliament, finishing behind the governing Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which suffered an electoral collapse. The CDU/CSU obtained 33 percent of the vote, its worst result in over 60 years.

The AfD has acquired political influence far beyond its actual strength. It set the tone in the election campaign with its agitation for a crackdown on refugees and the strengthening of the state's repressive apparatus. All of the establishment parties sought to outdo the AfD with pledges to hire more police and deport more refugees, thereby bolstering the far-right party. Why vote for the more established parties' versions of the AfD's chauvinist and authoritarian politics when you could vote for the real thing? The CDU/CSU lost more than a million voters to the AfD, while the SPD lost 470,000 and the Left Party lost 400,000.

That being said, the AfD's right-wing extremist programme does not enjoy mass support. Even among AfD voters, 60 percent said they backed the party as a protest and not because they support its policies. The AfD's rise is, above all, the result of the rightward lurch of all of the established parties, which, with the support of the media, are doing all they can to channel mounting social discontent in a right-wing direction.

In the past, nominally left parties would be expected to benefit from a social crisis such as that which is gripping Germany, including the explosive growth of low-wage jobs, the rise of poverty and homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, the catastrophic

conditions in the schools and hospitals, and the growing danger of war. But neither the SPD nor the Left Party are capable of making a social appeal to voters.

The SPD is politically bankrupt and reviled. Having imposed the Hartz laws, tax cuts for big business and the rich, and an increase in the retirement age to 67, the SPD bears chief responsibility for the outrageous levels of social inequality.

An even more abject role is played by the Left Party. Workers long ago stopped taking its combination of left phrases and right-wing policies seriously. The Left Party's main task consists in blocking a movement of workers to the left. In eastern Germany, where the Left Party long dominated, the AfD finished in second place behind the CDU. There, the far-right party won 22 percent of the vote. The AfD even managed to take first place among men, with 27 percent of the male vote.

The ruling elite came to terms with the AfD even before the votes had been counted. It is only a matter of time before it integrates the right-wing extremist party into government.

CSU leader Horst Seehofer declared that the AfD won votes because the CDU and CSU "left open their right flank." He pledged that they would change this in the future and take a "clear stand."

The historian Michael Wolffsohn rejected describing the AfD as "Nazis." It is, he said, a reaction to "major social problems" such as the flood of refugees, for which the other parties have no answers. Political scientist Jürgen Falter warned against overdramatising the AfD's entry into parliament. Far from being a "cause for concern," it represented "a normalisation of German politics after our history."

The established parties' horror at the AfD's right-wing extremist policies was hypocritical from the outset. This is shown by the case of Jörg Baberowski.

The professor at Berlin's Humboldt University, who cleared the way for the AfD with his agitation against refugees and his downplaying of the crimes of the Nazi regime, received unanimous backing from the established parties and the media when the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP—Socialist Equality Party) publicly criticised him. The SPD, whose leading member Sabine Kunst is the president of Humboldt University, and the Left Party played a prominent role in the defence of Baberowski. Even when a court confirmed that Baberowski could be described as a right-wing extremist, they continued to support him.

The AfD's rise is the result of the rightward shift of the entire ruling class, which is responding to the global capitalist crisis and the growth of internal and external tensions by returning to its most despicable traditions. In the 1930s, business associations, the military, bourgeois politicians and academics reacted to the intensification of the class struggle by backing Hitler and supporting his appointment as chancellor.

This must be taken by the working class as a serious warning. None of the establishment parties, least of all the SPD and Left Party, are willing or able to stand up to the right-wing extremists.

Similar developments are taking place in other European countries. In France, the right-wing extremist candidate for the National Front, Marine Le Pen, made it to the second round of the presidential election. In Austria, the participation of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in government following elections in October is seen as all but certain. The social democrats as well as the conservatives are ready to form a coalition with it.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei is the only party that stood in the federal election on a left-wing and socialist platform. "With their right-wing policies, the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens facilitate the growth of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)," the SGP's election statement declared. "This right-wing extremist party can pose as an opposition force only because none of the establishment 'left' parties oppose the ruling class with a socialist perspective."

The rise of the right-wing extremists can be stopped only through the construction of a socialist party that unites workers around the world in the struggle against nationalism, social inequality and war. That party is the SGP and the International Committee of the Fourth

International.



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