

In latest victory for the far right, neo-fascists gain in Austrian election

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The result of this past weekend's Austrian election follows an international pattern. Despite the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s and the growing danger of a new world war, far-right parties are gaining influence while the parties of the official "left" go from defeat to defeat.

The rise of Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland and Viktor Orbán in Hungary; the leading role of the anti-immigrant UKIP in the Brexit referendum in Britain; Donald Trump's victory in the United States; the National Front's second-place finish in the French presidential election; and the entry of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) into the German parliament are all part of this process.

At the end of 2016, the traditional ruling parties and the media pundits in Europe hailed the narrow victory in the Austrian presidential election of Alexander Van der Bellen over Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), as proof that the rise of the far-right was receding.

Instead, the FPÖ registered significant gains in Sunday's general election, coming in second to the conservative People's Party (ÖVP). The neo-fascists are now poised to enter the government in coalition with the conservatives. Meanwhile, the establishment parties of the right and the nominal left have all adopted the anti-immigrant, chauvinist programme of the FPÖ.

Sebastian Kurz of the ÖVP has led this "turn from the traditional path of the Christian Democrats to the right-wing margin," as the *Berlin Tagesspiegel* put it. "The positions of Kurz and the right-wing populist FPÖ differ only in detail, in the main," the newspaper added.

Austria's Social Democrats, who finished third, are competing with the conservatives to win over the neo-fascists. Following Sunday's poll, Federal Chancellor

Christian Kern of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) renewed his party's offer of a coalition government with the FPÖ.

What is the reason for the rise of far-right parties all across Europe? The answer is to be found less in their politics than in those of the supposed "left."

The SPÖ long since ceased to be a party of social reform. It is a bourgeois, pro-imperialist party, whose role is to defend the interests of Austrian capital against its international rivals and its own working class. As CEO of the Austrian rail system, Kern was a top business executive, with a salary of 700,000 euros, before becoming the leader of the SPÖ and assuming the office of chancellor last summer.

The Social Democrats work closely with the trade union bureaucracy, which functions as an arm of the corporate elite, tasked with suppressing all working class resistance to attacks on jobs and wages and promoting economic nationalism to block European-wide and international working class solidarity. The SPÖ's trade union wing has led the drive within the party for collaboration with the neo-fascists.

The Social Democrats (and the Democratic Party in the US) are orbited by a plethora of pseudo-left satellites, which, like the Greens, have their origin in the student protest movement of the 1960s and represent the interests of well-off middle-class layers.

It is not that the mass of workers support racist and fascist policies. On the contrary, there are many signs of political radicalization to the left, a growth of anti-capitalist sentiment and a revival of class struggle. In the US, 13 million people, mainly youth and workers, voted last year in the Democratic primary elections for a candidate they believed to be a socialist, Bernie Sanders, only to see this long-time functionary for the Democrats throw his support to the candidate of Wall

Street and the CIA, Hillary Clinton.

And in May, a majority of people between the ages of 18 and 35 polled by the Union of European Broadcasters said they would participate in a “large-scale uprising” against the status quo. Nine out of 10 young people in the survey said they agreed that “banks and money rule the world” and the same margin said the “gap between the rich and the poor” is widening.

The electoral victories of the right wing are largely the result of the mass desertion of workers from the “labor” and social democratic parties that have for decades dissociated themselves from any opposition to capitalism and abandoned any orientation to the working class or concern with the issues working people confront. Instead, they have promoted the politics of racial and gender identity, which are used to enrich a thin, privileged elite among ethnic minorities and women, while the masses of workers of all races face unrelenting attacks on their living standards.

The workers are well aware, moreover, that these parties are completely complicit in imposing the austerity policies demanded by the banks and corporations.

The ability of far-right parties to obtain a broader hearing for anti-immigrant and racist policies is the result of the absence of any progressive outlet for social discontent within the political establishment. The far right is gaining strength by default, as the entire bourgeois political spectrum—including the organizations of the pseudo-left—lurches furiously to the right.

The indifference and hostility of the SPÖ, the unions and the pseudo-left to the social interests of the working class has created a political vacuum that is being filled by the far-right with its demagogic slogans. Agitation against refugees and Muslims dominated the entire Austrian election campaign. They are being scapegoated for every conceivable social problem—unemployment, wage-cutting, the erosion of health care—for which no establishment party offers a progressive answer.

Austria was held to be a model social democratic country until the 1980s. There were social gains in the fields of public housing, old-age provision, etc. But this came under increasing attack as Austria’s banks and corporations strove to become competitive in the global marketplace at the expense of the working class.

Capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and the creation of a vast pool of cheap labour in low-tax locations ruled by ex-Stalinist bureaucrats turned capitalist oligarchs spurred on this offensive.

Vienna is less than 100 kilometres from the borders with Hungary and Slovakia, where the average salary is just one-third of that prevailing in Austria. The federal states of Burgenland and Carinthia, two FPÖ strongholds, border Hungary and Slovenia.

These social disparities have generated social tensions and anxieties, which intensified when, in the summer of 2015, tens of thousands of refugees came to Austria via the Balkan route. They were fleeing the wars waged by the US and its European allies that had destroyed large parts of the Middle East. At first, they were met with popular sympathy. But the conservatives and Social Democrats adopted the xenophobia of the FPÖ in an effort to channel social discontent in a reactionary direction.

Millions of workers and youth are looking for a way to fight back and defend their social interests. What is necessary is the construction of an independent movement of the working class, which mobilises resistance to social attacks, war and the drive toward dictatorship on the basis of a socialist perspective. It is necessary to build a party that unconditionally defends the democratic rights of all workers, native-born and immigrant alike, and unites the working class across all national and ethnic divides. This party is the International Committee of the Fourth International and its national sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.



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