

Ruling conservatives, social democrats collapse in EU elections

Alex Lantier**27 May 2019**

The European elections ended yesterday, after every state in the 28-member European Union (EU) elected its representatives to the European parliament on one day between Thursday and Sunday. The result was a dramatic defeat for the conservative and social democratic parties that governed Western Europe for decades and built the EU with the Maastricht Treaty adopted in 1992, after the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe.

In Germany, France, Britain and other countries across Europe, these parties that once formed a duopoly dominating the parliament failed to win 50 percent of the vote combined. Most voters voted for other parties. Voters also punished, in addition to the conservatives and social democrats, petty-bourgeois populist parties tied to the trade unions, who have opposed growing social protest against the EU.

These parties are hemorrhaging support, as a wave of strikes and protests oppose policies of austerity, militarism and police repression that millions of workers identify with the EU. Mass strikes against EU-dictated wage freezes have gone forward in Berlin and other regions of Germany, Portugal and Belgium, amid “yellow vest” protests against French President Emmanuel Macron. At the same time, protests are mounting across Eastern Europe, with the Polish national teachers strike and protests against Hungary’s “slave law” mandating unpaid overtime.

Mounting opposition in the working class can find no expression within the political establishment, however. Some Green parties, who are closely linked to the social democrats, won increased support in elections that unfolded immediately after mass youth protests against climate change. Across much of Europe, however, the prime beneficiaries of the discrediting of the EU and the traditional ruling parties were far right parties.

In Germany, the EU’s economic powerhouse and largest country by population, the conservative Christian Democratic Union-Christian Social Union (CDU-CSU) won 28 percent of the vote and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) 15.5 percent—down 7 and 11.8 percent, respectively. The national CDU-CSU-SPD “Grand Coalition” government now has only 43.8 percent of the vote. The Left Party fell 2 percent to 5.4 percent, while the Greens and the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany both rose to 22 percent and 10.5 percent, respectively.

German youth massively turned against the ruling parties: among under-30s, 13 percent voted for the CDU-CSU and 10 percent voted for the SPD, while 33 percent voted for the Greens.

Marine Le Pen’s neo-fascist National Rally (RN) again won the

European elections after its 2014 victory at 23.3 percent, narrowly beating Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) at 22.1 percent. The Greens took third with 13.1 percent. The Gaullist The Republicans (LR) and the Socialist Party (PS), France’s traditional parties of rule since the May 1968 general strike, fell to a humiliating 8.4 percent and 6.6 percent, respectively, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI), which won 20 percent of the 2017 presidential vote, took only 6.6 percent.

While LFI was hammered for not supporting the “yellow vest” protests against the bitterly unpopular Macron, and by the defection to the RN of LFI member Andréa Kotarac, the RN tried to claim the mantle of “best opponent” of Macron. RN election list leader Jordan Bardella called for “dramatically reorienting” economic policy and new attacks on immigrants. Both Bardella and Le Pen called for new French legislative elections.

With almost all results counted in the UK, Nigel Farage’s far-right Brexit Party emerged victorious at 31.6 percent, with the Liberal Democrats (20.3 percent) beating the traditional ruling parties, Labour and Conservatives, into third and fifth place with 14.1 and 9.1 percent, respectively. The Green Party beat the Tories on 12.1 percent of the vote.

The Brexit Party carried large swathes of the Tory rural vote, resulting in the worst vote in the party’s 185 year-history, but also made headway in cities in pro-Brexit northern England and in Cardiff. Farage took almost all the vote of his former UK Independence Party, which won the last EU elections. Labour lost pro-Remain votes to the Liberal Democrats, who even took Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s Islington district of London. Labour also lost votes to the pro-Remain Greens. In London as a whole, the Brexit Party was beaten into third place by the Lib-Dems and Labour.

In Scotland, Labour was wiped out by a sweeping victory for the Scottish National Party.

In Belgium, a collapse of the New Flemish Alliance (NVA) and a surge of the fascistic Flemish Interest (VB) put the two parties in the lead, at 13.5 and 11.5 percent respectively, ahead of the Francophone Socialist Party (PS, 10.5 percent). The French and Flemish wings of the Green party combined won 15 percent. With general elections unfolding in parallel with the European elections, it appears that the so-called “sanitary cordon” agreement between the other bourgeois parties not to include the VB in a Belgian national government may collapse.

In some countries—including Austria, Spain and the

Netherlands—one or the other traditional ruling party eked out an electoral victory. In Austria, where the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) faced a scandal as a video exposed its leader and Austrian Vice Chancellor Heinz Christian Strache seeking corrupt deals with individuals he believed to represent a Russian oligarch, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) won 35 percent of the vote. The social democrats (SPÖ) won 24 percent and the FPÖ fell around 7 percent to 17.5 percent.

In the Netherlands, after bitter debates between Prime Minister Mark Rutte's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD, 15 percent) and Thierry Baudet's far right Forum for Democracy (11 percent), the Labor Party (PvdA) won a surprise first place finish, though with only 18 percent of the vote.

In Spain, the European election results largely mirrored the recent general elections, which saw a substantial turn-out of voters for the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) to block the rise of the fascistic Vox party. The PSOE took 30 percent, the right wing Popular Party (PP) and Citizens 19.5 percent and 14 percent, and the Podemos-led alliance 11 percent. Vox received six percent of the vote. This represented a significant fall for the alliance led by Podemos, the Spanish ally of the German Left Party and LFI, whose component parts had won 18 percent in the last EU elections.

In Greece, the right-wing New Democracy took 34 percent of the vote, beating the pro-austerity Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras into second place with 27 percent of the vote.

Across much of Europe, however, far-right parties solidified their hold over bourgeois politics. The far right Lega party of Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini led with 30 percent of the vote. The Democratic Party (PD) with 22 percent narrowly edged out the Five Star Movement (M5S, 21 percent), while Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) fell to only 10 percent. There was speculation that Salvini could push for new elections in order to throw the M5S out of government and install a one-party Lega government in Italy.

Far right parties advanced in several Eastern European countries. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party winning a 56 percent majority, relegating the social democrats to 10 percent and the fascistic Jobbik party to 9 percent. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) won 43 percent of the vote, beating the European Coalition at 38.4 percent.

The EU elections are further confirmation that while working people across Europe are increasingly entering into struggle—driven by anger at social inequality, militarism and attacks on democratic rights—the ruling elite is relentlessly shifting to the right. For now, a mass-fascist movement like those of the 20th century has not developed. But facing growing social anger, the ruling class is pouring hundreds of billions of euros into the armed forces, carrying out violent crackdowns like Macron's attack on the "yellow vests" and building a vast network of prison camps for immigrants.

The differences between the traditional pro-EU parties and the far right parties on these issues are almost entirely tactical matters of foreign policy, over whether the EU could be an effective vehicle for building a common European armed forces to threaten

America, Russia and China. This found consummate expression in French Defense Minister Florence Parly's call for an EU army and a vote for Macron's party "if you don't want a defenseless Europe." Predictably, the turn far to the right by the entire ruling class has again allowed the far right to pose as populist opponents of the EU.

It cannot be fought by a turn to pro-EU parties like the Greens, a coalition of pro-capitalist parties across Europe who are the undeserving beneficiaries of mass social anger against the reactionary policies pursued over decades by the conservatives and social democrats. Their pro-imperialist politics are epitomized by the record of the German Greens, the largest Green party in the continent. Having shed their pacifist pretensions and backed NATO's Balkan wars in the 1990s, they entered into coalition with the SPD in the 2000s to ram through the hated Hartz IV austerity laws.

They are just as distant from and hostile to growing workers struggles as the scoundrels such as the German Left Party, LFI, Corbyn, Podemos or Syriza, which have done everything in their power to disorient or suppress growing working class struggles.

The decisive question now facing workers and youth across Europe, faced with the imperviousness of the financial aristocracy to all social protest, and its ruthless policy of police-state repression, is a turn to revolutionary struggle.

The turn now is to the struggles of the working class and the fight to unify them across Europe and internationally on a common socialist revolutionary perspective and leadership. It was for this purpose that the International Committee of the Fourth International's European sections intervened in the election campaign, including running candidates of the German *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, to launch the struggle to build the ICFI in countries across Europe.



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