

German state elections show growing dissatisfaction with the ruling elite's "profits before lives" pandemic response

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The elections in the German states of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate last Sunday revealed the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling elite's "profits before lives" pandemic response, and the social spending cuts imposed by the federal Christian Democrat (CDU)/Social Democratic Party (SPD) grand coalition and state governments. The CDU, the party of Chancellor Angela Merkel, achieved its worst results in postwar history in both elections. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has been built up by the ruling class in order to impose its right-wing agenda, lost close to half of its support.

In Baden-Württemberg, both the CDU with 24.1 percent of the vote (down 2.9 percent since the last election), and the Social Democrats with 11 percent (down 1.7 percent), achieved their worst ever results. The two parties, which took 78 percent of the vote between them in the southwestern German state just 20 years ago, received a mere 35 percent this time.

In Rhineland-Palatinate, the parties received a somewhat larger share of the vote, with 35.7 percent for the SPD and 27.7 percent for the CDU. But here too, both parties suffered losses. The SPD's share of the vote fell by 0.5 percentage points. Given the decline in voter participation, this translated into a 10 percent decline in total votes compared to 2016. The CDU's share of the vote dropped by 4.1 percentage points, which was also an historic low.

The biggest losses in both states were suffered by the AfD. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the right-wing extremists lost 4.1 percentage points and 40 percent of its voters in absolute terms, finishing with a result of 8.3 percent. In Baden-Württemberg, the AfD's share of the vote fell by 5.2 percentage points to 9.7 percent, which amounted to a loss of 42,000 votes compared to 2016.

The Green/CDU Baden-Württemberg state government led by Minister President Winfried Kretschmann suffered a major setback. The coalition lost 0.6 points in percentage terms, but due to the decrease in voter participation the

governing parties' total votes fell by over 10 percent compared to 2016. Although the Greens' share of the vote increased by 2.3 percentage points to 32.6 percent, they lost tens of thousands of voters in absolute terms.

In Rhineland-Palatinate, the so-called "traffic light" coalition of the SPD, Greens and Free Democrats made slight gains thanks to the increase of 4 percentage points in support for the Greens. In absolute terms, however, the governing parties lost close to 40,000 votes.

The Left Party, which governs in Berlin, Bremen and Thuringia, and is also involved at the federal level in imposing social spending cuts, militarism and the mass infection of the population, saw its share of the vote stagnate well below the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation in both states.

The election results are a distorted expression of the growing opposition to the governments' coronavirus policy and the dramatic growth of social inequality. The largest growth of any group in the election was of non-voters, who are turning away from the entire political establishment. They rose by 6.6 percentage points in Baden-Württemberg and 6 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate. The share of the vote going to smaller parties without parliamentary representation increased by 4.8 percent in Baden-Württemberg and 6.1 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the Free Voters (FW) even managed to gain parliamentary representation, with 5.4 percent of the vote.

The CDU's collapse was undoubtedly worsened by the so-called "mask affair." Several days prior to the election, it was revealed that a number of CDU and Christian Social Union deputies exploited their positions to personally cash in by arranging government contracts for the purchase of masks from private companies.

But these revelations merely gave sharp expression to the government's policy. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the banks and big business have been showered with hundreds of billions of euros through bailout packages and

stock purchasing programmes. In order to ensure industrial companies could make record profits, workers were exposed to deadly dangers on a daily basis. All of the parties categorically excluded a full lockdown, including all nonessential businesses. As a result, over 73,000 people have already died in Germany from COVID-19.

The CDU's lead candidate in Baden-Württemberg, Susanne Eisenmann, is an especially aggressive advocate of this policy of death, and had extremely low popularity ratings as a result. As education minister in Kretschmann's cabinet, Eisenmann demanded the reopening of schools irrespective of incidence rates in January, at the height of the second wave. Under conditions of rapidly accelerating infection rates, she recently sent all year five and six students back into in-person classes without any steps being taken to ensure social distancing.

The AfD is the most vehement advocate of reopening the economy at any price, and backed the right-wing extremist protests organised by the coronavirus deniers. The fact that the fascist party suffered the largest losses in both states and lost almost half of its voters shows that, contrary to claims in the media, its policies do not enjoy mass popular support. The AfD is promoted above all by the ruling elite in order to enforce its reactionary agenda.

The murderous policy of mass infection is supported by all parties in parliament. Even though the "mask affair" focused particular attention on the role of the CDU, and Eisenmann strongly advocated the policy of reopenings, Green Minister President Kretschmann and his Social Democrat colleague in Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreier, are no less vehement in their endorsement of reopening the economy.

The Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate elections underscore just how interchangeable the established parties are. Both Kretschmann and Dreier's coalitions are characterised by the mass deportations of refugees, the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus and the pursuit of an aggressive policy of "profits before lives" amid the pandemic.

In 2019, Kretschmann's government deported 2,648 asylum seekers, and it continued to remove numerous refugees during the pandemic. In the crowded and unhygienic refugee centres, the virus is running rampant. Instead of closing the camps, the authorities ordered the refugees to be confined inside and monitored by the military.

The army's intervention, under the pretext of providing official aid to the state authorities under conditions of the pandemic, is part of a comprehensive build-up of a police-state apparatus. The so-called "night of violence in Stuttgart" served as a pretext for the expansion of personal checkpoints, body cameras for police officers, widespread video surveillance and racist family tree criminal

investigations.

All parties wasted no time in underscoring their readiness on election night to continue the government's policies in a variety of right-wing coalitions. SPD General Secretary Lars Klingbeil and the head of parliamentary affairs for the Greens, Britta Haßelmann, declared their interest in forming a federal government coalition with the Free Democrats. The Greens are also still considering the option of a coalition with the CDU, with which the SPD is currently in a coalition at the federal level.

The Left Party is also prepared to join a federal government. Its federal affairs officer, Jörg Schindler, responding to a question on whether "the Left Party would make itself capable of governing on foreign and security policy," answered, "Of course, there's no question about that." Prior to this, the new party leadership of Susanne Henning-Wellsow and Janine Wissler made similar remarks.

The elections and the responses they have generated contain an urgent lesson. Amid the pandemic and the deepest capitalist crisis since the 1930s, all parties are closing ranks to intensify their policies of social spending cuts, militarism and mass infection with the coronavirus. The mounting opposition to this can only find a progressive expression if workers and young people intervene independently into political events.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) is standing in the federal election to fight for a socialist perspective. We are the only party opposing the all-party government and fighting for a socialist programme that places the protection of human lives ahead of corporate profits. Not a single job or a single cent should be sacrificed to the greed for profit of the rich. To the rise of militarism and fascism, we counterpose the international unification of working people.



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