

How the establishment parties in Germany strengthen the far-right AfD

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This coming Sunday, the last state election in Germany before September's federal election is being held in Saxony-Anhalt. It exemplifies how the establishment parties—the Christian Democrats (CDU / CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and the Left Party—are preparing the ground for the far-right.

For five years, the CDU, SPD and Greens—in other words, the three parties whose candidates are the most likely to succeed Angela Merkel as federal chancellor—have jointly governed Saxony-Anhalt. The task of this coalition was ostensibly to form a “bulwark against the right,” after the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won nearly a quarter of the vote in the 2016 state election.

Instead, the coalition under Minister-President Reiner Haseloff (CDU) has largely adopted the AfD's policies, making ever new overtures to the far-right and intensifying social attacks on the population. For example, the state government's current coronavirus policy, whereby public health measures are being ended step by step, largely corresponds to the AfD's demand that any lockdown efforts be ended immediately. The Left Party, as a loyal parliamentary opposition, has ensured that the growing opposition against the state government has not found independent expression.

The AfD has benefited from this in two ways. The adoption of its programme by the three-party coalition and the constant advances by CDU politicians, who would have preferred to form a coalition with the AfD immediately, have strengthened the far-right party politically. And the lack of any serious fighting perspective and left-wing opposition has enabled the far-right to use some of the anger over the catastrophic social conditions to their advantage.

Although the AfD has been weakened at the federal level due to internal squabbles and is riddled with neo-Nazis in Saxony-Anhalt, it is scoring well over twenty percent in current polls and is second only to the CDU. At one point in mid-May, it was even just ahead of the CDU.

The SPD, Greens, FDP and Left Party are all scoring around 10 percent in the polls. For the Greens and FDP, which narrowly missed entering the state parliament in the last election, this means an increase, for the SPD a slight loss and for the Left Party a heavy loss. In 2006 and 2011, 24 percent voted for the Left Party. In 2016, the figure was 16 percent.

Saxony-Anhalt has never recovered from the social devastation that followed German reunification 31 years ago, which destroyed tens of thousands of industrial jobs. The social crisis has worsened under the present coalition. In 2016, before the last election, 47 percent of the population rated the economic situation as good; in April of this year, the figure was only 33 percent. Unemployment is 7.5 percent, well above the national average of 5.9 percent. The coronavirus pandemic has deepened the crisis.

Large numbers, and especially younger people, have moved out of the region. While 2.9 million lived in Saxony-Anhalt in 1990, today there are just 2.2 million. Their average age, 48, is the highest of all the German federal states. In the 2017 federal election, there were 2.4 over-70-year-

olds for every 18- to 29-year-old eligible voter. The State Statistics Office predicts that the population will decline by a further 11 percent by 2030.

Saxony-Anhalt is highly rural. More than half the population lives in places with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In terms of economic output, the state, together with Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, ranks last nationwide. At 28,700 euros per capita, the state's gross domestic product is well below the national average of 40,100 euros. The standard of living is correspondingly low.

What binds all the parties represented in the state parliament together is the fear of a social uprising against these untenable conditions. That is why they promote and strengthen the AfD. State premier Haseloff's constant assurances that they will not cooperate with the AfD under any circumstances, even after this election, are merely empty promises. Haseloff knows that making an open commitment towards the hated AfD would cost the CDU massive vote losses in the state and the federal election. According to a survey, even 77 percent of CDU voters reject cooperation with the AfD.

In reality, the CDU parliamentary group in the state legislature has already made repeated attempts at government cooperation with the AfD during the last legislative period. As early as August 2017, large parts of the CDU parliamentary group voted together with the AfD to form an inquiry commission to investigate so-called “left-wing extremism.”

In summer 2019, deputy CDU faction leaders Ulrich Thomas and Lars-Jörn Zimmer wrote a “memorandum” that openly advocated a coalition with the AfD. The voters of the two parties were pursuing similar goals, it said. It must be possible “once again [to] succeed in reconciling the social with the national”—an unmistakable allusion to National Socialism (Nazism). Today, the party says, “the content of the paper was correct and important,” reports newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. Thomas and Zimmer are running for 3rd and 4th place on the party list in the state elections.

The leading proponent of this line is Holger Stahlknecht, state interior minister since 2011 and CDU state chairman since 2018. He never misses an opportunity to flaunt his far-right sympathies. For example, he wanted to appoint Rainer Wendt, head of the police union and a figurehead of the extreme right, as a state secretary, only backing down after fierce protests.

Stahlknecht was also responsible for leaving the synagogue in Halle completely unprotected when right-wing terrorist Stephan Balliet carried out his attack there in 2019; only a strong wooden door prevented a massacre. Stahlknecht later complained to police officers about the fact that they could not be deployed elsewhere because they were guarding Jewish institutions. This sparked fierce protests from Jewish organizations.

When it became known that Robert Möritz, a board member of the Anhalt-Bitterfeld CDU district association and a CDU municipal election candidate, had been active in right-wing terrorist circles as a neo-Nazi, Stahlknecht publicly came to his defence.

Last spring, 100 refugees in Halberstadt staged a hunger strike to protest their inhumane treatment by Stahlknecht's interior ministry. Around 850

people had been locked up in the central contact centre for asylum seekers, guarded by police officers and security guards without any protection against the coronavirus.

It was only when the CDU parliamentary group in the state assembly joined forces with the AfD last December to block an increase in the annual broadcasting levy, paid by all individuals and used to fund public broadcasters, and Stahlknecht publicly defended this in an interview, that Haseloff gave him the boot to save the coalition with the SPD and the Greens. The latter, for their part, then voted against the levy increase to preserve the coalition. The AfD had achieved its goal despite Stahlknecht's resignation.

At the federal level, the CDU is also ready for collaboration with the AfD—despite claims to the contrary. This is demonstrated by the refusal of its chairman and chancellor candidate Armin Laschet to take action against Max Otte, the “AfD sympathizer with a CDU membership card” (*Der Spiegel*).

Last Saturday, the economist and fund manager was elected chairman of the “WerteUnion,” an association of 4,000 arch-conservative CDU and CSU members that also includes the former head of the secret service Hans-Georg Maaßen.

Otte has never made any secret of his sympathies for the AfD. Until January, he headed the board of trustees of the AfD-affiliated Desiderius Erasmus Foundation for three years, he gave lectures to the AfD parliamentary group and organizes the New Hambach Festival every year, where CDU/CSU and AfD parliamentarians meet. He had already publicly announced in 2017 that he would vote AfD. When CDU politician Walter Lübcke was murdered by a neo-Nazi in 2019, he denied the right-wing extremist background of the crime. Even the WerteUnion chairman at the time, Alexander Mitsch, had therefore called for his expulsion.

Nevertheless, when asked about a possible party expulsion procedure against Otte, Laschet replied that this was “not an issue for us because the WerteUnion is not an issue.” In other words, Laschet is letting AfD sympathizers in the CDU/CSU have their way because he is interested in a strong AfD and possible government cooperation with it.

In Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD is dominated by the völkisch-nationalist “Flügel” (“wing”), which has since officially disbanded but continues to set the tone politically. Its election posters read, “Our country—our rules” and “Stop the lockdown madness.” It calls for an end to measures designed to assist the integration of refugees and propagates the slogans of the coronavirus deniers. Björn Höcke, the frontman of the “Flügel” from neighbouring Thuringia, is constantly involved in the campaign. Despite the pandemic, the AfD holds mass rallies and threatens counterdemonstrators with violence.

Among the candidates running for the state parliament are known neo-Nazis. For example, broadcaster MDR's “Fakt” program identified Mathias Knispel, running in list position 25, as a participant in a demonstration of 700 right-wing extremists in Magdeburg in November 2018 demanding, among other things, freedom for convicted Holocaust denier Ursula Haverbeck.

Maximilian Tischer, an ex-soldier and close friend of former Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) officer Franco A., who is currently on trial in Frankfurt for preparing a violent act of state-endangerment, is running for list position 26. Tischer's sister is Franco A.'s partner and has a child with him. Maximilian Tischer was temporarily arrested himself because he helped Franco A. fake his false refugee identity and, like him, was active in far-right prepper groups that maintained death lists of political opponents to be executed on a “Day X.” He was nevertheless released.

Since then, he has worked for AfD parliamentarian Jan Nolte, who gave him access to the Bundestag (federal parliament), heads the AfD's state committee on foreign and security policy in Saxony-Anhalt and sits on the state board of the AfD youth there.

The Greens, SPD and Left Party are unreservedly complicit in allowing this right-wing conspiracy to unfold unhindered. In Saxony-Anhalt, the SPD has governed for ten years, and the Greens have governed for five years together with the CDU, deceptively claiming that they are a “bulwark against the right.” In fact, it is a right-wing bulwark against the working class.

The Left Party would also have joined in had it been asked. Its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), had already rehearsed its first government participation in Saxony-Anhalt. In the so-called “Magdeburg Model,” it supported an SPD minority government from 1994 to 1998, under which the official unemployment rate rose to 20 percent. In her latest book, “Die Selbstgerechten” (“The self-righteous”), its leader Sahra Wagenknecht advocates political positions that hardly differ from those of the AfD.

In the state parliament, all parties are already working closely with the AfD. For example, the state parliament committees for “Labour, Social Affairs and Integration,” “Internal Affairs and Sports” and “State Development and Transportation” are led by AfD representatives. Their committee deputies come from the Green Party and the CDU. The Council of Elders is formed by the state parliament president Gabriele Brakebusch (CDU) together with the two state parliament vice presidents Wulf Gallert (Left Party) and Willi Mittelstädt (AfD).

The same is the case in neighbouring Thuringia, where the Left Party heads a minority government with the SPD and Greens that is supported on a vote-by-vote basis by the CDU and itself cooperates with the AfD. It collaborates with the fascists in state parliamentary committees and has helped elect them to high office. Last February, the “left” state prime minister Bodo Ramelow used his vote to make AfD man Michael Kaufmann vice president of the state parliament.

What applies to Saxony-Anhalt also applies to the federal election. In the Bundestag, all the parties are already preparing massive attacks on the working class and youth—to recoup the multi-billions given away to the banks and corporations in the coronavirus crisis, and used to finance the massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr and prepare for new wars, to suppress social resistance by stepping up the powers of the police and intelligence services, and to continue the “profits before lives” policy in the pandemic that has claimed nearly 90,000 lives in Germany alone.

Regardless of who wins the election in Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD will play an important role in the next federal government. It will provide the political line, as is already the case, or serve as a member of the government itself.

Only an independent working class movement that places the social needs of the majority above the profit interests of the rich can halt the danger from the right. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the Fourth International, is the only party running in the federal elections with a socialist programme to build such a movement.



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