

# Following Saarland state election, SPD prepares social attacks

**Peter Schwarz**  
30 March 2022

The results of Sunday's state elections in Saarland are generally being portrayed as a triumph for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which after 23 years succeeded in becoming the strongest party again in Germany's smallest state and in forming a majority government.

However, a closer analysis reveals a different picture. The election result is not a vote for the policies of the SPD, but an expression of the bankruptcy of a political system that no longer gives voters the opportunity to even begin to influence politics with their ballot paper.

The SPD has an absolute majority of 57 percent in the new state parliament, with 29 of 51 deputies, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) 19 and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) 3. This is in stark disproportion to the SPD's real influence. The SPD received only 43.5 percent of the votes, with only a quarter of the 750,000 eligible voters casting their ballot for it. Thirty-nine percent did not go to the polls—8 percent more than in the state election five years ago and more than in any other state election except 2004. With 288,000 abstentions, the "party of non-voters" was by far the strongest.

The SPD owes its absolute majority to the fact that 22 percent of the votes cast were for parties that failed to clear the 5 percent hurdle required to enter the state assembly. Although valid, the votes of more than one-fifth of the electorate are thus not represented in the state parliament.

Both the Greens and the Liberal Democrats (FDP) narrowly missed entering the Landtag (state assembly), where they had already been absent in the previous legislative period. The Left Party literally imploded; it lost 10.3 points and ended up with 2.6 percent. In addition, 12 parties referred to as "others" received around 10 percent of the vote, 6.6 percent more than

five years ago. Four of them—Tierschutzbund, Freie Wähler, die Basis, bunt.saar—achieved 1 percent and above. The AfD received 5.7 percent, making it the third party to enter the state parliament.

The SPD gained 13.9 points, but it did so mainly in exchange for its previous coalition partner, the CDU, which lost 12.2 percent and achieved its worst result since 1955 with a share of 28.5 percent. CDU voters over 60 switched to the SPD in large numbers or stayed at home.

Among the over-70s, the SPD scored 49 percent, but did much worse with younger voters. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, only 32 percent voted for the SPD and 19 percent for the CDU. Eleven percent voted for the Greens, 9 percent for the FDP and 20 percent for "other" parties.

The CDU's top candidate and previous state premier, Tobias Hans, who took over the office from Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer only three years ago, was apparently punished for the widespread social misery and the state executive's disastrous coronavirus policies. Of the nearly 1 million inhabitants in Saarland, 235,000 have been infected so far, and 1,500 have died. With 153 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, Saarland has the second-highest death rate from COVID of all the federal states after Bavaria in western Germany. In an interview shortly before the election, Hans had complained, "Yes, obviously the frustration related to coronavirus is being dumped on me."

His replacement by Anke Rehlinger (SPD) will not change government policy. Rehlinger has been a member of the state administration since the CDU and SPD formed a grand coalition 10 years ago. First, she led the Justice Department, then the Ministry of Economics. During these 10 years, she has worked closely with the CDU without ever coming into

conflict. Rehlinger has always given assurances that she would continue the previous policies as minister president.

This will lead to fierce conflicts with the working class. Saarland, once a centre of the coal and steel industry, has been suffering the consequences of deindustrialisation for decades. In terms of average gross income, it is, along with Schleswig-Holstein, at the bottom of the list of west German states.

After 10 years of CDU–SPD coalition, poverty and unemployment are well above the national average. Child poverty has risen more sharply in the past 10 years than in any other federal state. The poverty rate among minors climbed from 16.2 to 22.2 percent between 2010 and 2020, according to calculations by the Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband charity association.

Saarland is also the frontrunner in terms of public debt per capita, which has risen by 77 percent since 2008. The state government is responding with massive cuts to comply with the “debt ceiling.” Added to this are the consequences of the restructuring of the auto industry, the sanctions against Russia and the massive spending on war and armaments.

Already, the future of the state’s largest employer is in question. The Ford plant in Saarlouis, built in the 1970s as a reaction to the decline in coal mining, is now threatened with closure. As economics minister, Rehlinger has worked closely with the IG Metall union to nip any resistance from Ford workers in the bud.

With a mixture of subsidy offers and concessions on wages and jobs, the state government and the union are trying to outmanoeuvre the Ford plant in Valencia, Spain, whose future is also in question—a policy that only divides workers and plays into the hands of the Ford corporation.

Rehlinger will use her absolute majority in the state parliament to intensify the attacks on the working class in close cooperation with the federal government of her party colleague Olaf Scholz. The times when SPD governments cushioned the effects of social crises or adopted social improvements are over, at the latest since Gerhard Schröder’s Agenda 2010 attacks on welfare and labour “reforms.”

The bankruptcy of a perspective based on state aid and social partnership is vividly illustrated by the collapse of the Saarland Left Party. In 2009, it had received 21.3 percent of the vote and 12.8 percent in

2017. Now, it has been kicked out of the state parliament with 2.6 percent. This was preceded by the resignation from the Left Party of Oskar Lafontaine, who had a considerable following as the state’s former SPD prime minister.

As we wrote in the article on Lafontaine’s resignation, his social policies “always pursued the goal of suppressing the class struggle, not strengthening the working class.” The Left Party, which he founded with Gregor Gysi in 2007, was supposed to prevent “the devastating social consequences of Agenda 2010 from leading to the revival of the class struggle.” The bankruptcy of this policy is now manifesting itself in the demise of the Saarland Left Party, which served as Lafontaine’s main field of activity in recent years.

Workers must prepare for fierce attacks and class struggles. This requires building an independent party that represents the interests of the working class, unites them internationally and fights for a socialist programme—the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party).



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