

Workers denied any choice in key German election Sunday

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12 May 2022

Workers have no real choice in the election which takes place Sunday in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The representatives of all the parties currently in the state parliament—Christian Democrats (CDU), Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, Free Democrats (FDP) and far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)—are agreed that the working class must bear the costs of the coronavirus pandemic and the Ukraine war. Their programmes hardly differ.

With 18 million inhabitants, NRW is the most populous German state and, with the Ruhr valley as its core, includes the largest industrial region in Europe. One in five workers are employed in the industrial sector and 10 of 40 companies listed in the DAX, the German stock market index, are based in NRW.

The SPD has dominated politics in the state since 1966—since 1995 in a coalition with the Greens. In 2005, Jürgen Rüttgers (CDU) took over as state premier for five years until the SPD and Greens returned to power in 2010 under Premier Hannelore Kraft. In 2017, the SPD and the Greens lost power again because of their anti-working class and anti-social policies. Since then, the CDU has governed the state in a coalition with the neo-liberal FDP—first under Armin Laschet, and then for the last half a year under Hendrik Wüst.

All these various coalition governments have carried out ruinous policies. The state is now plagued by high unemployment levels and poverty in its former coal and steel regions, dilapidated infrastructure that forces commuters to spend hours in traffic jams, catastrophic conditions at schools (with €7,500 per pupil per annum, NRW spends less than any other state) and exploding rents. At the same time, a wealthy economic elite and middle class enjoy life in the suburbs of Cologne, Düsseldorf and other large cities in the state.

The consequences of the economic sanctions against Russia and the transition to alternate forms of energy have exacerbated the social crisis. High energy prices endanger hundreds of thousands of jobs remaining in the steel, chemical and other industries. In addition, rapidly rising inflation is making life unaffordable for millions of people.

The political parties are aware of growing anger and opposition, which they are trying to dampen with all the types of promises they made and failed to keep in previous elections. They are determined, however, to shift the impact of the crisis onto the working class.

The CDU's leading candidate, Hendrik Wüst, is a former business lobbyist and management consultant who was transport minister under Laschet for four years before replacing him as head of government. If he wins the election, Wüst has promised more collective bargaining with the trade unions, a €12 minimum wage and the inclusion of members of the CDU's so-called "socially oriented" wing in his government.

The SPD's top candidate, Thomas Kutschaty, is touting his working class origins in the northern Ruhr area. A graduate in law, Kutschaty was Minister of Justice for seven years under Hannelore Kraft.

In this capacity he became known above all for his public feud with the Essen social judge Jan-Robert von Renesse, who in Kutschaty's view interpreted Germany's "Ghetto Pensions Act" too liberally. The law, passed by the Bundestag in 2002, 57 years after the fall of the Nazi regime, granted a pension entitlement to Jews who had worked as labourers in ghettos established by the Nazis. Kutschaty dismissed the judge and dragged him to court for defamation of character, triggering international protests—including from the Center of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors and the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

The only promise the election candidates take seriously is their promise to boost the powers and equipment of the police. Wüst has promised that Herbert Reul (CDU) will remain interior minister in his cabinet if he wins the election.

Reul is a strict law-and-order man who is quite prepared to turn a blind eye to legal transgressions, however, when it comes to police operations. He has increased the police budget five times in a row and now plans to hire 3,000 new police officers a year. Ruel is responsible for a draconian police law which led to tens of thousands taking to the streets in protest. The law gives the police intelligence surveillance powers, allows for the detention of suspected “dangerous persons” and expands the possibility of random checks by police.

The outcome of the election is open. For weeks, the CDU and the SPD have been neck-and-neck at around 30 percent, with the CDU usually slightly ahead. In the last state election, the CDU received 33 per cent of the vote compared to 31.2 per cent for the SPD.

If there is no fundamental change in the next days, the Greens will decide the composition of the next coalition. In the polls, the Greens are standing at around 17 per cent, more than 10 points above their result in 2017, when they received only 6.4 percent of the vote. Based on their current polling the party could form a governing coalition in the state with either the CDU or the SPD.

In the federal ruling “traffic light coalition” (SPD, Greens, FDP) the Greens are the most aggressive party of war. They are pushing for an escalation of the Ukraine war, which in reality is a NATO war directed against Russia. The party, with deep roots in the upper-middle class, also favours tightening sanctions against Russia, even if this costs hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The FDP, on the other hand, is unlikely to be able to help the CDU or the SPD win a majority. It has slipped from 12.6 percent to 8 percent in the polls, due largely to the disastrous coronavirus and school policy implemented by the state’s current Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (FDP).

Gebauer incurred the wrath of millions of parents, students and teachers after she withdrew the most elementary protective measures at schools and daycare centres. After the first coronavirus lockdown in Germany, she pushed for a rapid opening up of schools

and undermined all other safeguards. She even prohibited schools from taking their own initiatives to limit exposure to the virus and took action against headmasters who persisted with the wearing of safety masks in schools. She brushed aside the concerns of parents of children with pre-existing illnesses. Gebauer’s emails to schools, changing existing rules overnight, were dreaded.

According to a poll, at the height of the omicron wave, 74 percent of respondents were unhappy with Gebauer and her coronavirus policy. Some commentators even consider it possible that popular discontent with Gebauer could lead to the electoral defeat of her coalition partner Wüst.

The far-right AfD is also expected to re-enter the state parliament with about 7 percent, slightly less than in the last election, according to polls. The Left Party, which narrowly missed entering the parliament in 2017 with 4.9 percent, is reckoned to have no chance this time round. It is polling at 3 percent.

The incumbent government’s handling of the flood disaster last summer could also influence the outcome of the election. In Rhineland-Palatinate the flood claimed the lives of 134 victims, and 49 people died in NRW after the government failed to warn and evacuate them in time. Environment Minister Ursula Heinen-Esser (CDU) had to resign in April this year when it emerged she had lied about her behaviour and had spent a holiday of several days in Majorca immediately after the flood catastrophe.

No matter how the election ultimately turns out, whether Wüst or Kutschaty take over as premier and govern with the Greens, the FDP or both of these parties, there will be no change for the working class. It can only defend its social and political interests by taking up the struggle against social cuts and war independently on the basis of an international socialist perspective and by building its own party—the Socialist Equality Party.



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