

The election of the far-right AfD in Sonneberg, Germany and the fight against fascism

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The election of Robert Sesselmann, the candidate of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), as Sonneberg district administrator in the federal state of Thuringia casts a spotlight on the growing fascist danger in Germany. Ninety years after Hitler seized power, a representative of a party that trivialises the Third Reich and is made up of open fascists is taking on executive government responsibility for the first time since 1945.

What happened? In Sunday's run-off election, Sesselmann won with 52.8 percent of the vote against Christian Democratic Union (CDU) candidate Robert Köppel, who received 47.2 percent and was also supported by the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. Turnout was 59.6 percent.

The scenario could repeat itself in other district council and mayoral elections in the coming weeks and months. At the state level, the far right is now the strongest force in eastern Germany (excluding Berlin), with 32 percent, and is the second strongest in Germany as a whole, with around 20 percent. Clearly whipped up by the election success, Thuringia fascist leader Björn Höcke has already put himself in play as his party's possible candidate for chancellor in a future federal election.

In their first statements, the establishment parties reacted with a mixture of warnings, mutual recriminations and covering their own tracks. Thuringia's state Interior Minister and SPD leader Georg Maier called the result a "dam breach" and an "alarm signal for all democratic forces." The Green Party leader called the result "dismaying" and also "a warning to all democratic forces."

While Thuringia state Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) played down Sesselmann's success as a "democratic election," Left Party leader Martin Schirdewan wrote on Twitter: "Uncertainty is growing & the extreme right is cooking its brown [fascist] soup on it," but the federal coalition government had "no courage to mess with the rich" and was "giving in to the culture war." Above all, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Liberal Democrats (FDP) would "roll out the red carpet" for the AfD "by adopting their slogans & policies."

Schirdewan thus reveals more about the right-wing character of his own party and the role it itself plays in the rise of the AfD than he might like. First of all, the Left Party, like all the other parliamentary parties, supported the right-wing CDU candidate Köppel in the run-off election and thus—to use the words of the Left Party leader—helped to "roll out the red carpet" for the AfD

and fuel its far-right agitation and politics.

Moreover, in Thuringia it is becoming clear that the Left Party in particular is also pushing through the interests of the "rich" and thus creating the despair and frustration that the right-wing extremists are exploiting. Since its predecessor organisation reintroduced capitalism into East Germany 32 years ago, the Left Party has repeatedly been involved in right-wing capitalist governments. Currently, it leads a minority state government in Thuringia with the SPD and the Greens, which decides and implements its social attacks with the support of the CDU.

The result is a social disaster. Thuringia is one of the poorest federal states. According to a Bertelsmann study, almost one in four children and one in three young adults is at risk of poverty. In 2021, that amounted to 76,770 children (23.7 percent) and 42,853 young adults aged 18 to 25 (34.1 percent).

The district of Sonneberg is particularly affected by this. According to data that *Zeit Online* "exclusively obtained and analysed from the Federal Employment Agency," Sonneberg is ranked 621 out of all 636 medium-sized towns in nationwide salary rankings. The current wages of people living in Sonneberg who are employed full-time and subject to social security contributions are 795 euros below the average German salary. At the same time, the gap between top and low earners has continued to widen over the last two decades.

Unlike in the 1930s, the electoral successes of the AfD are not the result of a fascist mass movement. According to current Deutschlandtrend polling by broadcaster ARD, only just under a third of potential AfD voters were "convinced" by the party; 67 percent of those surveyed voted for the AfD "because they are disappointed by the other parties." It speaks volumes about the right-wing character of the establishment parties that the AfD, which is militaristic to the bone, even receives antiwar votes because it criticises the NATO war against Russia.

The fact that the AfD won the election in Sonneberg mainly on the basis of protest votes does not lessen the perils of the situation. Besides the differences with the 1930s—when the ruling class brought Hitler to power to prepare for world war and brutally suppress the workers' movement—dangerous parallels also exist.

"If in 1933 the ruling elites' conspiracy was based on an existing fascist movement, today it is the other way round. The growth of the AfD is the result of such a conspiracy. It cannot be

understood without examining the role of the government, the state apparatus, the parties, the media and the ideologists at the universities who are paving the way for it,” wrote Christoph Vandreier, the leader of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), in his 2018 book *Why are they back? Historical Falsification, Political Conspiracy, and the Return of Fascism in Germany*.

The book shows in detail how all the establishment parties, from the CDU/CSU to the Left Party, have systematically created the social, ideological and political conditions for the rise of the AfD in recent years, integrated the far-right party into the political system and adopted large parts of its programme themselves.

And it explains that the revival of German militarism and fascism ultimately has the same objective causes as in the last century. “Global capitalism has not solved any of the problems that led to catastrophe in the 1930s. All social, economic and geopolitical contradictions are breaking out again with force,” wrote Vandreier.

With the formation of the first state government with the participation of Hitler’s NSDAP (Nazi Party), Thuringia played a central role in the rise of the Nazis as early as 1930. Today, the state is once again a centre of right-wing conspiracy inside the state apparatus. Here are just some of the most important facts.

On February 5, 2020, the CDU and FDP elected Thomas Kemmerich as Thuringia state prime minister with the votes of the far-right AfD. As a result of an international wave of outrage, Kemmerich was forced to resign and Ramelow was reelected. But the deliberate strengthening of the AfD continued under the SPD-Left Party-Green minority government.

Only a few days after his reelection, Ramelow himself joined forces with the right-wing extremists. He helped AfD candidate Michael Kaufmann into the office of vice president of the Thuringia state parliament with his own vote and boasted publicly about it. He had “very fundamentally decided to clear the way for parliamentary participation, which must be granted to every parliamentary group, also with my vote,” he wrote on Twitter.

Since then, the Left Party, SPD, Greens, CDU, and FDP have been cooperating closely with the fascists, as a glance at the parliamentary committees shows. For example, the Committee for Economy, Science and Digital Society is headed by Dieter Laudenbach of the AfD (his deputy is Kemmerich). Other bodies led by the AfD are the committees for Migration, Justice and Consumer Protection and for Environment, Energy and Nature Conservation. The respective committee deputy chairs are recruited from the SPD and the Greens. For its part, the AfD provides the deputy chair in the Prison Commission (a sub-committee of the Petitions Committee) led by the Left Party.

The run-off election in Sonneberg that made Sesselmann district administrator was itself part of this right-wing conspiracy. The programme of CDU candidate Köppel, who was supported by the Left Party, SPD, Greens, and FDP, hardly differed in content from that of the AfD representative. Significantly, Köppel was also supported by the far-right former head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (as Germany’s secret service is called), Hans Georg-Maassen, who himself was the CDU candidate for the Thuringia district associations of Schmalkalden-

Meiningen, Hildburghausen, Suhl and Sonneberg (!) in the last federal elections.

Maassen stands like no other for the right-wing extremist machinations inside the state apparatus. As head of the domestic intelligence service from 2012 to 2018, he played a key role in protecting right-wing extremist terror networks in the police, military and intelligence services and in cracking down on leftists. Among other things, he was directly responsible for the SGP being included in the secret service annual parliamentary report as a “left-wing extremist party” and an “object of surveillance” because it agitates against “alleged nationalism, imperialism and militarism” and campaigns for a “democratic, egalitarian and socialist society.”

The election of the AfD will further accelerate the collaboration of the establishment parties with the extreme right. The reaction of the SPD mayor of the neighbouring district town of Coburg, Dominik Sauerteig, is significant. He was “of the opinion” that it was “not his place to comment negatively on the majority decision of the sovereign citizens of the Sonneberg district, or even to scold the voters,” he wrote on Facebook. When it came to the joint issues of the city of Coburg and the district of Sonneberg, he said he would “take Mr Sesselmann to task in a very concrete way in his responsibility for the citizens of the region.”

Workers and young people who are repulsed by the rise of the AfD and the cowardly and servile collaboration of the ruling elite with the fascists must draw the necessary political conclusions from the experiences of recent years. The only party that consistently fights against the growth of the extreme right and the return of fascism and militarism in Germany and internationally is the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party).

The building of the SGP and the International Committee of the Fourth International as a new revolutionary mass party of the international working class is the order of the day. The most important lesson from history is that the struggle against fascism and war requires the struggle against their cause, capitalism, and against all parties defending this bankrupt system. It requires the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme.



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