

State elections in eastern Germany: The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance advocates far-right politics

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Due to widespread opposition to the pro-war policy of the federal coalition government and the social devastation for which all parties are responsible, the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) are predicted to make strong gains in the upcoming state elections being held in eastern Germany.

In Thuringia, the AfD is polling around 30 percent, putting it almost 8 points ahead of the second-placed Christian Democratic Union (CDU), while the BSW is scoring 18 percent. In Saxony, where state elections are also taking place on Sunday, the AfD is neck-and-neck with the CDU at just over 30 percent. Here, the BSW is in third place with around 14 percent. In Brandenburg, where the state parliament will be elected on 22 September, the AfD is also in first place with 24 percent, and the BSW is in fourth place with 17 percent, just behind the Social Democrats (SPD) and CDU.

The AfD is winning not because there is mass support for its fascist programme, but mainly because the vast majority reject the pro-war policy and social cuts of the governing parties. The AfD is exploiting widespread anger for its reactionary agenda, which in reality aims to further escalate German militarism. That is why it is being built up and courted by the ruling class. After the attack in Solingen last Friday, the establishment parties are taking this far-right campaign to a new level.

The BSW, a split-off from the Left Party, does not offer a progressive alternative to the federal coalition government comprising the SPD, Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP). Like the AfD, it is deflecting social anger at the incredible wealth of the rich towards the weakest in society, the refugees. It defends war and militarism, but, like the AfD, wants to give them a different aim.

The BSW can win support because it officially rejects the war in Ukraine and because it is taking a stand against the social catastrophe for which the majority of its representatives were responsible as former Left Party politicians. The SPD, Left Party and Greens have repeatedly betrayed their voters politically, organised one social catastrophe after another and transformed themselves into angry warmongers.

It began with the industrial devastation wreaked across the former East Germany after reunification in 1990, which destroyed 8,000 companies and cost millions of jobs. It then continued with the “Agenda 2010” policies of the SPD-Green federal government between 1998 and 2005, which transformed East Germany into a huge experimental field for low-wage work. Finally, it culminated in the consequences of the Russia sanctions and the war in Ukraine. The Left Party, which initially presented itself as an alternative to the SPD and the Greens, supported these policies wherever it entered into government.

The social consequences are palpable. Even 34 years after German reunification, the standard of living in the east is significantly lower than in the west. Especially in rural areas, aging, crumbling infrastructure, a

shortage of doctors and teachers, and bitter poverty are widespread.

Even so-called industrial flagship projects, which were subsidised with a great deal of taxpayers’ money, repeatedly collapsed. Now, auto factories, chip manufacturers and numerous other factories are in danger of going under in the maelstrom of the global economic war. In Saxony alone, 14 larger companies experienced a severe crisis last year, went bankrupt or closed their locations.

The SPD, the Greens and the Left Party are now so hated and discredited throughout eastern Germany that they must fear for their entry into the state parliament. The SPD, the Chancellor’s party, is barely polling 6 percent in Thuringia and Saxony, barely above the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation. In Thuringia, where it has provided the prime minister for the last ten years with Bodo Ramelow, the Left Party stands at 14 points. Five years ago, it was still at 31 percent. At 4 percent in Saxony, it is expected to miss out on entering the state parliament for the first time.

The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance

With her decision to leave the Left Party after 35 years’ membership and found a new party, Sahra Wagenknecht is trying to fill the gap left by the SPD and Left Party. The Left Party has long played a key role in defending capitalism and suppressing the class struggle in eastern Germany. The BSW is now trying to take on this role.

It is trying to prevent the growing outrage at the AfD fascists from combining with a mass movement against capitalism and war. It is not weakening the AfD but strengthening it.

The BSW promises a “change of policy,” but has already signalled its willingness to form a coalition state government with the CDU, SPD or Left Party after the elections. With the BSW polling between 14 percent in Saxony and 18 percent in Thuringia, it is likely to be difficult or impossible to achieve a government majority without its participation, as long as the AfD does not enter the government.

Preparations for a coalition with the BSW have long been underway in the background. On 21 August, the weekly *Der Spiegel* reported: “Behind the election campaign scenes, [the Saxony CDU prime minister] Kretschmer has long been secretly exploring with the BSW what might be possible in the future. Officials from Christian Democrat-led ministries are already working on papers for coalition negotiations.”

The BSW promises more social justice, but refuses to touch capitalist private property and the power of banks and corporations. It attaches great importance to being neither “left” nor “socialist.”

The BSW promotes peace in Ukraine but rejects a mass movement against the war. Instead, it appeals impotently to the warmongers for peace. It is not even prepared to clearly name NATO's responsibility for organising a right-wing coup in Kiev in 2014 and for provoking the Russian invasion by arming Ukraine. Instead, its Saxony election programme declares: "We condemn Russia's attack on Ukraine, which is contrary to international law."

This is followed by demands for a ceasefire and negotiations, for a lasting peace architecture for Europe, for the resolution of conflicts through diplomacy, etc. "There is only one sensible way out of the dangerous spiral of confrontation: de-escalation and new disarmament treaties." The logic of war must "finally be replaced by the objective argument of balancing interests."

This is to deliberately deceive the electorate. The war in Ukraine, which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and threatens to result in a nuclear catastrophe, cannot be ended by pacifist appeals to the warmongers. Washington and Berlin are fuelling the war not because they are "unreasonable," but because they are pursuing tangible imperialist interests. They want to crush Russia—as they once did Yugoslavia—in order to divide up its vast resources among themselves.

Like the AfD, the Wagenknecht party also criticises NATO's war against Russia because it wants to free Germany from its dependence on the USA. She calls for a Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) that can "fulfil its constitutional mission" and is "adequately equipped to do so." In particular, former SPD and Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine, Wagenknecht's husband and closest adviser, accuses the German government of being a "vassal" of the USA. As if German imperialism had not proved that it is capable of the most brutal crimes even without American help!

Otherwise, the election programme of the Wagenknecht party combines set pieces from the worst traditions of Stalinism with portions of the AfD programme: nationalism, agitation against migrants, increasing police powers, and rejecting COVID protective measures. The first demands of her Saxony state election programme are: "Community-oriented police; swift and effective justice; stopping uncontrolled migration; reviewing the Coronavirus period."

When it comes to agitating against migrants, Wagenknecht never misses an opportunity to outdo the AfD. She rails against "uncontrolled migration," calls for an "asylum about-turn" and the "deportation of criminal refugees." She commented on the attack in Solingen by saying, "Allowing uncontrolled migration leads to uncontrollable violence."

This is where the reactionary character of the BSW is most clearly evident. Right-wing agitation against migrants serves the ruling class everywhere to promote fascist movements, to step up the powers of the police, to divide the international working class and to scapegoat the weakest for the crimes of capitalism. That is also the goal of the AfD.

Anchored in the existing power structures

Wagenknecht and Lafontaine are the public face of the BSW. They appear regularly in the media. In the second row, there are numerous experienced politicians who are deeply rooted in the existing power structures. Most of them come from the Left Party. In addition, there are also managers, small business owners, well-known journalists and other representatives of the so-called *Mittelstand* (well-off middle-class layers).

In Saxony, the trade union official Sabine Zimmermann is the lead candidate for the BSW. She has been working full-time for the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) since 1992 and has been chairwoman of the DGB in Eastern Saxony since 2002. In 2005, she left the SPD for

the Left Party, for which she sat in the Bundestag (federal parliament) until 2021.

Katja Wolf, the BSW's lead candidate in Thuringia, also comes from the Left Party. She was the mayor of the city of Eisenach for twelve years and, according to the *Tagesschau*, "is networked and recognised across party lines." Wolf is flanked by Steffen Schütz, an entrepreneur in the marketing industry, and Steffen Quasebarth, a longstanding television presenter at broadcaster MDR.

The CDU's lead candidate in Thuringia, Mario Voigt, says he "respects Katja Wolf as a person and has never known her to be a stubborn ideologue." Voigt considers a coalition government with the BSW to be possible, while Wolf, for her part, emphasises that she wants to end the "experiment of minority government," which—if the AfD does indeed remain outside—would be most likely to happen through an alliance between the CDU and the BSW.

But the BSW also does not rule out closer cooperation with the AfD. In July, it spoke out against a "cordon sanitaire" in the European Parliament, with which other factions wanted to prevent the election of far-right MEPs to leading positions.

Michael von der Schulenburg, a member of the BSW, called this an "abuse of the parliamentary majority." The BSW has "fundamental differences of opinion with the parties affected by these firewalls and their parliamentary groups," he said. But one must recognise "that they were elected and thus represent different parts of the European population in this parliament."

When asked by *Der Spiegel*, BSW General Secretary Christian Leye confirmed this line applied to Germany as well. "There will be no coalitions or cooperation with the AfD," he said. However, they would "no longer go along with voting against every AfD motion on principle, even if it is correct in content."

From Stalinism to the BSW

Sahra Wagenknecht has undergone numerous transformations in her 35-year political career, but one thing has remained constant: her nationalism, her commitment to the existing state power and her hostility towards any mass movement from below.

When mass protests against the regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) broke out in 1989, the 20-year-old joined the Stalinist state party SED (Socialist Unity Party). When the SED supported the dissolution of the GDR and the introduction of capitalism, she remained in the party, which now called itself PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), and she became the mouthpiece of the "Communist Platform" faction.

However, this platform had nothing to do with communism. It was an alliance of die-hard Stalinists who justified the worst aspects of the SED dictatorship. They were bitterly hostile to the perspective of world socialist revolution, which the Trotskyist movement had defended against Stalinism.

After the PDS entered several East German state governments, Wagenknecht left the Communist Platform. In 2011, she published the book *Freiheit statt Kapitalismus* (*Freedom Not Capitalism*), in which she sang the praises of post-war West German capitalism and economics minister and later chancellor Ludwig Erhard (CDU), who was hated among workers. Karl Marx, whom she had previously liked to quote, was no longer mentioned. Wagenknecht had finally converted to capitalism.

"Wagenknecht's paean to competition, the meritocracy and Ludwig Erhard is an unmistakable signal to the ruling class that the Left Party is prepared to defend capitalist rule by any means necessary, while ever broader layers of workers come into conflict with it," we commented at

the time.

Wagenknecht was now part of the inner circle of the Left Party and its parliamentary group in the Bundestag. In 2021, she attacked the party leadership's increasing orientation towards better-off urban middle-class layers and the identity politics prevalent in that group, in her book *Die Selbstgerechten (The Self-Righteous)*.

Wagenknecht did not lead this attack from the left, from the international class standpoint of the working class, but from the right, from a socially reactionary, nationalist standpoint. She railed against cosmopolitanism and cultural open-mindedness, campaigned for protectionism and a strong state, denounced migrants and refugees as wage suppressors, strikebreakers and culturally alien elements, and appealed to the "Mittelstand," to small and medium-sized companies and the self-employed who suffer from the effects of the world market.

The book anticipated the BSW programme, which combines social demagoguery and "peace" rhetoric with core elements of the AfD programme and explicitly defends capitalism.

Workers must reject Wagenknecht's attempt to save capitalism on the basis of extreme right-wing politics. Fascism, war and exploitation can only be combatted by mobilising the working class against their cause, capitalism. No problem can be solved without breaking the power of banks and corporations and putting them under democratic control.

Such a movement must be independent of all bourgeois parties—including the BSW and the Left Party—and the trade unions, which have been transformed into representatives of corporate interests. And it must be international, uniting workers worldwide on the basis of their common class interests.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and its sister organisations in the International Committee of the Fourth International stand for this perspective. We call on all workers and young people who want to fight against war and the rise of the AfD: get in touch with the SGP, study the *World Socialist Web Site* and our programme and join the SGP.



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