Lessons from the electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany

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3 September 2024

The electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the Thuringia and Saxony state elections and the debacle for the parties that compose Germany's federal government contain important lessons for workers throughout the world.

Amidst the flood of media and political commentary, one searches in vain for an explanation of why, eight decades after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, a right-wing extremist party could once again become the biggest party in a German state parliament.

On September 1, the AfD achieved a result of 32.8 percent in the state election in Thuringia, and 30.6 percent in Saxony. This percentage of the vote is almost as much as the Nazis received in the last Reichstag election in November 1932 before they took power, 33.1 percent. The AfD is thus by far the strongest faction in the new state parliament in Thuringia and is only one seat behind the CDU in Saxony.

The parties of Germany's federal coalition government—the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Free Democrats (FDP)—were severely punished. Together, they received only 10.2 percent of the votes in Thuringia, less than a third as much as the AfD. In Saxony, they achieved a combined 13.3 percent.

The basic reason for this political landslide lies not in the character of the AfD and its local leader Björn Höcke, who can be described as a "fascist" according to a court order. Rather, it must be explained as a product of the shift to the right of all the bourgeois parties, in particular, the supposed "left." They rolled out the red carpet for the AfD and opened all the doors for it.

Since the SPD, Greens and FDP took over the federal government almost three years ago, they have undergone an unprecedented shift to the right. Every aspect of their policy is dominated by war and military rearmament. They have almost doubled the military budget and supported Ukraine in the war against Russia with arms deliveries worth 23 billion euros, more than any other country except the US.

They have agreed to station US medium-range missiles on German soil, weapons that can reach Moscow and would make Germany the primary battleground in the event of a nuclear escalation.

For the first time since the defeat of Hitler's Wehrmacht, German tanks are once again rolling onto Russian soil. The German government is working with a regime in Kiev that brutally suppresses any opposition to the war and reveres as heroes the Nazi collaborators from World War II who took part in the Holocaust.

While the German government justifies every Israeli war crime with reference to "German responsibility for the Holocaust," this consideration does not apply to Russia, despite the fact that over 25 million people in the Soviet Union fell victim to the German war of extermination, a meticulously planned genocide. In Leningrad alone, the German siege claimed 1.1 million victims—most of them women, children and civilians.

In Gaza, the German government unconditionally supports the genocide of the Palestinians, whose brutal treatment is reminiscent of the crimes of the Nazis. Anyone who protests against it or even criticizes it will be slandered, intimidated and persecuted. Demonstrations and pro-Palestinian associations are banned, and anti-war activists are arrested and imprisoned.

The SPD/Green/FDP coalition is ruthlessly shifting the costs of these policies onto the working class and the most vulnerable in society by slashing spending on social assistance, basic child welfare, education, health, infrastructure and the environment. While stock prices and the wealth of the rich continue to rise thanks to generous state aid, workers' real incomes are falling dramatically.

In this reactionary climate, the AfD thrives and is deliberately promoted by the ruling elite. Especially in fomenting chauvinism against refugees, the governing coalition and opposition Christian Democrats are trying to overtake the AfD from the right. The weeks before and after the election were marked by relentless political incitement against refugees.

When the SPD came to power in 1998, in alliance with the Green Party, it destroyed the social achievements of the previous decades with Agenda 2010 and created a huge low-wage sector that had not previously existed in Germany.

Under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the SPD has brought this work of destruction to its culmination. Whatever remains of the welfare state and democratic rights will be sacrificed to the war juggernaut. The policy of social partnership, which has always served to defend capitalism, is finally bankrupt.

The SPD, which long ago ceased to be a workers' party, represents the interests of the corporations, banks, the state apparatus and German imperialism like all other bourgeois parties. It is incapable of providing an answer to the burning social questions that plague millions. The same goes for the Greens, the party of the wealthy, selfish urban middle class.

It is this that enables the right-wing demagogues of the AfD to exploit social discontent for their own ends. But no one should be

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fooled. The AfD is a right-wing, fascist party that—like the Nazis—speaks for the most brutal sections of the capitalist oligarchy.

Despite its criticism of the war in Ukraine, as far as the AfD is concerned, the German government's militarism does not go far enough. It demands even higher military expenditures and the reintroduction of conscription, so that Germany can wage war independently of the US.

It calls for the restriction of the right to strike, forced labour for recipients of welfare benefits, lower taxes for the rich, and an authoritarian police state. It rejects public health measures against COVID, even though almost 200,000 people have died from the infection in Germany alone. It stokes xenophobia and racism to divide and weaken the working class, downplays the crimes of the Nazis, and maintains close ties to neo-Nazis and right-wing terrorist networks.

The trade unions and the Left Party bear central responsibility for the growth of the AfD. They suppress the class struggle and have so far prevented the outrage over the German government's policies from finding a left-wing, progressive expression.

The unions consist of a huge apparatus of well-paid co-managers and company policemen who suppress or sell out any industrial action, to ensure that layoffs and wage cuts are implemented smoothly.

In the 1990s, the Left Party and its predecessor, the PDS, served as a reservoir for outrage over the consequences of German unification, which destroyed 8,000 companies and millions of jobs. Where they assumed government responsibility, these parties pursued policies just as right-wing as the SPD and the Greens, with whom they work closely.

The Left Party has now also collapsed. In Saxony, the party struggled to re-enter the state parliament. In Thuringia, where the party has led the government for 10 years, the Left Party lost almost two-thirds of its votes and was voted out of power. The Left party is now doing everything possible to help the right-wing CDU win a secure majority.

The AfD's influence is particularly strong in eastern Germany, which has never recovered from the industrial devastation after reunification and the consequences of Agenda 2010. But its influence is also developing in the west of the country. Nationwide, the far-right party ranks between 16 and 19 percent in the polls.

This basic political dynamic can be seen in almost all capitalist countries. The inability of the supposedly "left" or "democratic" parties to address the most elementary social and democratic needs of the masses drives the electorate to right-wing and fascist parties.

In the US, Donald Trump benefits from the fact that the Democrats, who are closely linked to the trade unions, are pursuing the interests of Wall Street, suppressing strikes, and advancing the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

In its statement on Labor Day in the US, the WSWS Editorial Board noted, "The Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, the military-intelligence agencies and privileged sections of the upper-middle class, is incapable of speaking to or advancing policies that address the social catastrophe confronting masses of workers and youth. This is what provides Trump and the Republicans the ability to exploit social anger. Workers must be warned, however: Trump and his MAGA movement are a new form of American-style fascism."

In Italy, the rise of Giorgia Meloni was preceded by three decades of betrayal by the successors of the Communist Party. In France, Marine Le Pen benefits from the right-wing course of several Socialist Party governments and presidents, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's bankrupt policies.

The fascist danger cannot be fought by supporting these bankrupt parties. Wherever they come to power, they intensify war policies and attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class. Nor will they shy away from collaborating with the fascists. In the CDU, calls are already growing in Saxony and Thuringia for a coalition with the AfD. In the US, the Democrats are forever seeking bipartisan agreement with their "Republican colleagues."

All established parties have responded to the election result by intensifying their attacks on refugees and thus implementing the AfD's policy. On Tuesday, a refugee summit involving the federal government parties and the CDU, as well as state governments, took place in Berlin, and it discussed further sealing off borders and cutting aid to refugees.

Social discontent and opposition to militarism and war are growing among the broad majority of the working class and youth. But they need a clear political perspective.

Poverty, unemployment, war and dictatorship can only be overcome by abolishing the capitalist system and replacing it with a socialist society in which social needs, and not the profits of the rich, come first. Without expropriating the large assets and corporations and putting them under democratic control, not a single problem can be solved.

This goal can only be achieved through a global strategy that unites the working class across all national borders and mobilizes it for a unified struggle against the world capitalist system. This is the basic conclusion that must be drawn from the developments in Germany, and it is what the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (Socialist Equality Party) and its sister organizations in the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting for.

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