Far-right AfD and anti-immigrant BSW win half the seats in Brandenburg state election

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The result of the Brandenburg state election last Sunday follows the same pattern as the elections in Saxony and Thuringia three weeks ago: anger over the federal government's policies of war and social cutbacks is manifesting itself in massive losses for the establishment parties, from which the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Left Party split-off Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) are benefiting.

With a record voter turnout of 73 percent, the AfD achieved its best result so far in Brandenburg (with 29.2 percent), the state surrounding the German capital, Berlin. The BSW, which was founded this year, won 13.5 percent of the vote. Since several parties failed to clear the 5-percent hurdle and thus missed out on entering the state parliament, the two parties together hold more than half of all the seats. The AfD has a blocking minority and can block important resolutions.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) achieved its worst result so far in elections in East Germany, with 12.1 percent. The Greens and the Left Party were voted out of the state parliament. The Liberal Democrats (FDP), which had already failed to make it into the last parliament with 4 percent, received less than 1 percent and thus not even half as much as the animal rights party.

The only exception was the SPD, which, after lagging behind in the polls for a long time, overtook the AfD on the home straight and won the election with 30.9 percent. Nevertheless, it is the second-worst result for the SPD in the state, which it has governed continuously since German reunification in 1990, only behind its 2019 showing.

State Prime Minister Dietmar Woidke, who was born in the region and has spent his entire private and political life there, focused the SPD's election campaign entirely on himself. He demonstratively avoided joint appearances with Chancellor Olaf Scholz and other SPD federal politicians. Shortly before the election, he threatened to resign if the SPD did not become the strongest party. Even the Prime Minister of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, who had defended his CDU majority in a similar way, called for Woidke to be elected—much to the displeasure of the CDU federal headquarters—in order to prevent an election victory by the AfD.

Woidke thus saved the SPD, but destroyed his governing coalition, an alliance of SPD, CDU and Greens, with which he has ruled since 2019. The Greens lost far more than the SPD gained (4.7 percentage points), with 6.7 and 3.5 percentage points respectively.

After the Greens' exit, the SPD and CDU have fallen one seat short for a majority. Since only four parties are now represented in the new state parliament, only the SPD and BSW have enough deputies to form a government capable of winning a majority without the participation of the AfD. The CDU has already stated that it will go into opposition and has no interest in the exploratory talks that Woidke has nevertheless offered it.

By contrast, the Wagenknecht party has in principle declared its willingness to participate in a government under Woidke and the SPD, as it has already done in Saxony and Thuringia. It will play the same role as the Left Party, from which it emerged: under the guise of a few phrases about peace and social justice, it will continue and intensify the hated policies of the SPD, the Greens and the CDU.

Its demands for more deportations, more police, an independent security and defence policy, trade war measures and a strengthening of the *Mittelstand* (small and medium sized business) show the right-wing core

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of the BSW's programme. Its opposition to arms deliveries to Ukraine and the stationing of US medium-range missiles on German soil, which won the party many votes, are purely symbolic. It is about "sending a signal," says BSW General Secretary Christian Leye, i.e., a gesture without consequences.

The BSW's lead candidate in Brandenburg, Robert Crumbach, is the perfect person for such a policy. Before he joined the BSW at the beginning of the year he had been a member of the SPD for 41 years. The lawyer, who is a member of the Verdi trade union, has worked, among other things, as a consultant in the Brandenburg Ministry of Labour, as an employee of the SPD parliamentary group in the state parliament and as an industrial tribunal judge in Potsdam and Brandenburg. So he is well connected.

An SPD-BSW government will further strengthen the AfD, which thrives on anger at the governments in Berlin and Potsdam, which it is able to exploit because the trade unions are sabotaging and suppressing resistance to it. The AfD benefits from the fact that the other parties adopt its policies lock, stock and barrel.

Thus the days before the Brandenburg election were marked—as they were before the Thuringia and Saxony elections—by a deafening campaign against "illegal refugees" and "criminal foreigners." CDU leader Friedrich Merz demanded that all refugees be turned back at the border, and federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) immediately put this into practice. The BSW, however, goes even further, demanding that all social support be withdrawn from asylum seekers obliged to leave the country.

Although the CDU and SPD have so far not dared to bring the AfD into government because of the expected popular resistance, this will change. They need the fascists and are strengthening them in order to suppress the growing resistance of the working class and youth.

The AfD has gained support particularly in rural areas, which have been steadily declining and impoverished since reunification. It also has above-average support among young voters. According to surveys, 31 percent of first-time voters (16 to 24 years) voted for the AfD, while the SPD only received 19 percent, the BSW 13 percent, the Left 7 percent and the Greens 6 percent of such voters. By contrast, the SPD polled 35 percent from voters over the age of 60, and 49 percent from voters over the age of 70.

The AfD is dominated by the far right in Brandenburg. Its lead candidate, Hans-Christoph Berndt, a laboratory physician and former staff council member at the Berlin Charité hospital, took over from Andreas Kalbitz as head of the state parliamentary group in 2020. Kalbitz had to leave the AfD at the time because of his membership in a banned neo-Nazi organisation.

But Berndt is just as bad. He is a co-founder and co-chair of the association "Zukunft Heimat" (Future Homeland), which organised racist demonstrations in Cottbus. He appeared as a speaker at anti-immigrant Pegida demonstrations in Dresden and is connected to New Right organisations such as the "Institute for State Policy" and the right-wing magazine *Compact*. He strongly opposes coronavirus protection measures and expressed public doubts whether anyone had died of the coronavirus at all. After a far-right meeting in Potsdam led to nationwide demonstrations, he stated that the "re-migration" discussed there was "not a secret plan, but a promise."

The AfD's gains in the polls are a warning sign. The growth of the far right can only be combatted by draining the social and political swamp in which it thrives—through the independent mobilisation of the working class and youth against social inequality, war and capitalism.

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