North Rhine-Westphalia municipal elections

Far-right Alternative for Germany wins in former SPD strongholds

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In municipal elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to exploit the anger and frustration over the decades-long policies of the establishment parties and nearly triple its vote share. In parts of the former industrial heartlands of the Ruhr, it is now the strongest force.

Sunday's vote was the first major ballot since the federal elections in February and was therefore seen as a test of the political mood. Of the roughly 13.7 million eligible voters, 56.8 percent cast ballots. This is the highest turnout for North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) municipal elections since 1994, and at that time the federal election was held simultaneously.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) managed to remain the strongest party statewide with 33.3 percent, but only narrowly, slipping by 1 percent compared to the last municipal elections in 2020. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) lost another 2.2 percent from its already poor result five years ago. In its traditional heartland—often referred to as the SPD's former "beating heart"—won only 22.1 percent. The AfD nearly tripled its share of the vote, winning 14.5 percent (plus 9.4 percent).

The two parties of the current federal government (CDU and SPD) saw their worst-ever municipal election results in NRW since the state was founded in 1946. The Greens also suffered heavy losses, winning just 13.5 percent (minus 6.5 percent), while the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) sank into irrelevance with 3.7 percent (minus 1.9 percent).

This is the direct outcome of the social devastation wrought over the last three to four decades by these parties, especially in the Ruhr region, and which has been accelerated most recently. At the federal level, the previous government of the SPD–Greens–FDP under Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) had declared a "new era" in 2021, funnelled €100 billion into rearmament and war, and made working people pay for it with welfare cuts, reductions in social infrastructure, layoffs and wage cuts. The current government under Friedrich Merz (CDU) and Lars Klingbeil (SPD) has resolved to respond to the deepening capitalist crisis and Donald Trump's election as US president by escalating this redistribution of wealth upwards.

One trillion euros are to flow into war and rearmament. The corresponding social attacks will be immense, falling on terrain already laid waste in the Ruhr: closed swimming pools and libraries, lack of childcare places, hollowed-out healthcare, gutted cultural institutions, and reduced municipal services. The neglect of numerous cities, especially in the major conurbations along the Rhine and Ruhr, will intensify further.

The AfD exploits this policy and the frustration it has generated within parts of the working class. For decades, the dominance of the mining and steel industries in the Ruhr was synonymous with the dominance of the SPD. With the decline of coal and steel, the cities grew impoverished, and the SPD imposed massive cuts at the local level. Unemployment and poverty rates are the highest in the state.

On Sunday, the AfD in Gelsenkirchen polled 29.9 percent, just behind the SPD (30.4 percent), and its candidate will contest the run-off for mayor. In Duisburg, the far-right party won 21.2 percent; in Hagen, 22.4 percent (here too, the AfD advances to the run-offs). In some polling districts the AfD won more than half the vote—for example in Duisburg-Obermeiderich (59 percent with a 21.4 percent turnout) and in Gelsenkirchen-Scholven (53.6 percent with a 34 percent turnout).

The growth of the AfD has two main causes. First, it is

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being consciously fostered by the ruling class. The historic attacks on jobs, wages and welfare, preparing for trade war and military war, cannot be implemented by democratic means. Just as in the US, where the Trump administration is building a fascist dictatorship, in every country the foundations are being laid for authoritarian forms of rule.

In Germany, the AfD emerged from the right-wing and neoliberal fringes of the CDU, the FDP and their milieu, and has been gradually integrated into the official political system. The supposed "firewall against the right" is pure rhetoric. The AfD sits on all parliamentary committees, chairs several of them, and works closely with the establishment parties. In parliament, before the federal election, Merz himself made common cause with the AfD against migrants. Meanwhile, a faction is growing inside the CDU openly calling for coalition with the far-right party.

Moreover, at the federal, state and municipal level the AfD's policies are being put into practice by all parties. While the CDU-SPD federal government dismantles asylum rights, introduces border controls, and abolishes the social and democratic rights of migrants, the CDU-Green Party NRW state government launches one law-and-order campaign after another. Most recently, Interior Minister Herbert Reul (CDU) announced that in future criminal statistics will record the nationality of all suspects, not only German nationals. The AfD cheered. Duisburg's SPD mayor Sören Link is notorious for his anti-migrant agitation, thereby paving the way for the AfD.

While it channels anger and despair into xenophobic and racist slogans, the AfD advances an explicitly fascist programme. It positions itself to brutally enforce war and welfare cuts against growing resistance, in order to protect the profits of the corporations and the wealth of the rich at the expense of the working class. It is no accident that Elon Musk, the second richest man in the world, supports far-right and fascist parties, including the AfD.

The second main cause of the AfD's rise is the SPD, which long ago severed all ties to the working class. The SPD is full of careerists, opportunists and apparatchiks who organise attacks on the population. They can do this only because they are closely bound to the trade unions. While the SPD ruthlessly enforces social cuts in Ruhr cities, every plant closure and every agreement cutting thousands of jobs in industry bears the signature of a union official—usually from IG Metall or the IG BCE (Mining, Chemicals, Energy). Over the last 50 years, since 1975, the remaining 200,000 coal jobs and 400,000 steel jobs have been wiped out in the Ruhr alone. Now nearly 10,000 more jobs at Thyssenkrupp and HKM (Hüttenwerke Krupp Mannesmann) are to go—already signed off by IG Metall.

By enforcing every assault on workers' livelihoods and suppressing the class struggle, the unions create conditions in which the AfD can thrive.

On top of this, those parties and organisations that claim to speak for workers or "ordinary people" defend the union apparatus and its policy of devastation. This applies above all to the Left Party, including its split-off "Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance" (BSW). Wherever they have the opportunity, they too support the SPD's destruction of social services. Many leading members of the Left Party are union officials.

It is urgently necessary for the working class to free itself from the stranglehold of the unions and take up a real struggle to defend jobs, wages and social rights. This would quickly undercut the far right and fundamentally change the situation.

But to do so, workers must organise themselves independently in rank-and-file action committees in workplaces, factories, offices and neighbourhoods alike. They must unite across all nationalities and backgrounds against the rulers in business and politics. All of society's resources must be used in the interests of those who create them—for decent wages, pensions, healthcare, education and culture, not for war and exploitation in the interests of the banks, corporations and their wealthy shareholders and political lackeys. This is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), stands for.

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