German government to continue with war and austerity despite political earthquake in state elections

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The elections in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (MV) have caused a political earthquake. Both were characterised by opposition to the federal government's policies of war and austerity. Yet Chancellor Friedrich Merz appeared before the cameras shortly after the polling stations closed and announced that, regardless of how voters cast their ballots, he would continue and intensify his agenda.

In MV, for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, a party from the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) will no longer be represented in a state parliament. The CDU and Social Democrats (SPD) together lost 12.5 percent. In Berlin, the figure was as high as 15.8 percent. The fact that the SPD was able to maintain a relatively strong result of 35.5 percent in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania was primarily due to the fact that its lead candidate, Manuela Schwesig, had deliberately distanced herself from federal policy, particularly on social issues.

In Berlin, the Left Party benefited most of all. With 25.7 percent, it achieved its best result ever, putting it 6.9 percent ahead of the CDU/CSU, which came second. Among 16- to 34-year-olds, it even secured well over 40 percent. In doing so, the Left Party was particularly successful in mobilising previous non-voters. It received 75,000 votes from this group, followed by 51,000 for the Greens and 36,000 for the SPD. To a lesser extent, voters also turned to the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which gained 7.2 percentage points to reach 16.3 percent and tended to win over older voters in the outlying districts, including the former Left Party stronghold of Marzahn.

The Left Party's result reflects anger over the federal government's policies and demonstrates a shift to the left among broad sections of the population. Ninety-one percent of Left Party voters stated that they approved of "the party opposing the federal government's social reforms." In second place, 88 percent of Left Party voters said "that it voices strong criticism of the Israeli government." This is particularly noteworthy because the party's lead candidate, Elif Eralp, deliberately excluded the issue of the war from the election campaign and even criticised her own members for showing solidarity with Palestine.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the Left Party achieved its worst-ever result on the same day, with 6.5 percent. There, it governed in coalition with the SPD for the past four years and was held responsible for the social catastrophe in the state. Its lead candidate, Simone Oldenburg, voted in the Bundesrat in favour of the federal government's trillion-euro rearmament programme.

These right-wing policies under a left-wing guise played right into the hands of the AfD, which became the strongest force with 38.2 percent, even if it is unlikely to provide the Minister-President due to a lack of coalition partners. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the AfD explicitly presented itself as a party of peace and was able to channel the anger towards the federal government—stemming from the Left Party's deplorable role—into its own reactionary agenda.

The most important reason for voting for the AfD was "social security," followed by "peace in Europe" as the third most cited reason. Thirty-six percent of AfD voters stated that they voted for the party out of disappointment with the other parties and not because of its manifesto. SPD lead candidate Schwesig was forced to admit on election night that the SPD had lost 48,000 voters to the AfD because of its support for the war in Ukraine. The AfD made particular gains among workers. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, it secured 51 percent of the vote among this group, and in Berlin a significant 29 percent, compared with 26 percent for the Left Party.

The federal government is responding to the mass opposition to war and cuts, as reflected in the election results, by shifting further to the right. A few minutes after the polling stations closed, Chancellor Friedrich Merz stated in an address broadcast by all television channels that his government would not be influenced by election results.

The Chancellor stated that his party's disastrous performance must not lead to the "reforms" being called into question. In the face of "very real threats," Germany and Europe must discuss their own strengths and weaknesses. The necessary measures must now be implemented with "backbone, steadfastness and patience." "Not everything will be met with immediate approval," and there will be "strains and new uncertainties," but the "reforms" must be pushed through, the Chancellor said.

One could not trample on the will of the electorate any more blatantly. The federal government's aggressive war course and massive attacks on social welfare are simply no longer compatible with democratic rights. Ultimately, they require an authoritarian regime. That is why there is a growing chorus of voices calling for

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the far-right AfD to be brought directly into government.

The Springer daily newspaper *Die Welt* reported favourably on the Monday following the elections that "some minister-presidents have cautiously begun to rethink the previous strategy of exclusion." The treasurer of the Junge Union, Clara von Nathusius, even called for coalition talks to be opened with the AfD. *Die Welt* commented: "The cautious minister-presidents and the influencer simply have a keen sense of the shift in public sentiment across the country. And they are, in various ways, working towards a political turnaround that is long overdue."

However, the new governments in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania will also continue to pursue a course of confrontation and social attacks. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, following the CDU's withdrawal, the only realistic option is actually a coalition between the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens. In Berlin, the Left Party and the Greens have already declared that they wish to explore the possibility of forming a government. To do so, however, they will also need the support of the SPD parliamentary group. An alliance between the CDU, the Greens and the SPD is also a possibility.

The Left Party's key election pledge—to expropriate the housing corporations in accordance with the 2021 referendum—was already up for debate on election night. The SPD immediately declared that this would not happen with them on board. "I am very sure that it won't work out in the end," said lead candidate Steffen Krach. Gregor Gysi of the Left Party also stated immediately on election night that a new referendum would have to be called, rather than finally implementing the clear vote of 2021.

The Green Party's lead candidate, Werner Graf, spoke out clearly on the war policy and the genocide in Gaza. He demanded that, before potentially joining the government, the Left Party consistently address the issue of "antisemitism" within its own ranks. "It must be clear how they are going to rein in these problematic elements within their party," he said. The Left Party's lead candidate, Elif Eralp, already criticised her own Neukölln district branch before the election for inviting an artist who had called for resistance against the genocide in Gaza.

Elif Eralp will continue the policies of the CDU and SPD if she becomes Governing Mayor. Ever since her predecessor, the PDS, first entered the Berlin state government in 2002, the Left Party has, citing "empty coffers" and "practical constraints," helped to orchestrate job cuts, wage reductions and the sale of public housing to speculators. Nothing will change in this regard even if she heads a red-red-green Senate for the first time.

With the full support of the SPD and the Greens, the Merz government is subordinating all areas of social life to the escalation of the war against Russia, spending hundreds of billions of euros on rearmament while slashing social spending. It is thus responding to the global crisis of capitalism, to which it has no answer other than war and class war.

The claim that, under these conditions, it is possible to carry out progressive reforms in Berlin and reduce rents without challenging the Merz government and the capitalist interests it represents is pure deception.

An Eralp Senate will pick up where the last red-red-green Senate left off in 2023. It will continue with social cuts, make savings in education and healthcare, and thus raise the funds for rearmament, which the SPD, the Greens and even the Left Party themselves voted for jointly in the Bundesrat, Germany's second chamber of parliament. These right-wing policies pave the way for the AfD, which enforces the same policies using even more brutal methods.

It is in this context that the Socialist Equality Party's (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) campaign in the Berlin elections assumes great political significance. The SGP countered the false argument that everyone must rally behind the Left Party in order to stop the AfD. It insisted that only the independent intervention of the working class, based on an international, socialist programme, can halt the rise of the far right.

It placed the escalation of war at the centre of its election campaign and stated in its election manifesto:

> War and militarism cannot be combated through pacifist appeals to the warmongers but only by stripping them of their power. The policy of war is not simply the result of wrong decisions by individual politicians. It stems from the deep crisis of capitalism, which, as in the 20th century, is once again leading to war and barbarism.
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> Workers have nothing to gain from war but everything to lose. We therefore oppose growing nationalism and war with the international unity of the working class. Instead of allowing themselves to be pitted against one another and shooting at one another, workers must unite across all borders in the struggle against capitalism.

Following the elections, it is all the more important to take up the conscious struggle for this perspective. We call on all opponents of war, fascism and social cuts to register as active supporters today and to take part in building the SGP!

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