

Austrian Social Democrats open to coalition with right-wing extremist Freedom Party

By Markus Salzmann
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Austria's Social Democrats (SPÖ) have cleared the way for a coalition with the right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ) just months ahead of parliamentary elections in October. Austrian Chancellor and SPÖ leader Christian Kern announced "the long-expected break of the taboo" (*Tageszeitung*) in mid-June, stating that a coalition with the xenophobic and anti-Muslim FPÖ was no longer ruled out in principle.

The so-called Vranitzky doctrine, which was named after former Chancellor Franz Vranitzky and lasted over 30 years, has thereby finally been consigned to history. In 1986, when Jörg Haider took control of the party and led it in a hard-right direction, Vranitzky announced that there would be no further coalitions and ended the governing coalition with the FPÖ, which until then had been viewed as a liberal party.

The SPÖ has made use of a so-called "values compass" to prepare the way for a coalition with the FPÖ. This was drafted at the direction of the SPÖ governor of Carinthia, Peter Kaiser. On this basis, the SPÖ executive agreed on seven principles that the party would insist upon as conditions with any potential coalition partner. Both documents were authored in a way to ensure that the FPÖ could formally agree to them without further considerations.

Along with a pension reform and cuts to the public sector, the SPÖ is calling for the strengthening of the police. This overlaps with the FPÖ's programme. At the same time, the SPÖ is promising a minimum wage of €1,500 per month and the introduction of an inheritance tax. Both of these promises have been made during the past two elections by the SPÖ, only to be swiftly abandoned afterwards.

The SPÖ leadership left no doubt that the presentation of the coalition conditions was aimed

directly at cooperation with the FPÖ. They could no longer say they were being excluded, but would have to decide for themselves "if they would return to the playing field," Kern said. Kaiser added, "We are in a situation where the wind is not blowing from the left, but coming from the right."

The FPÖ has already responded to the SPÖ's attempt to curry favour by stating that it does not view the SPÖ's "conditions" as representing a barrier to future cooperation. "In reality nothing more is unbridgeable," stated FPÖ deputy leader and former presidential candidate Norbert Hofer in an interview with *Der Standard*.

The SPÖ's openness to work with the FPÖ at the federal level has long been in the works. Already in 2004, Austria's Social Democrats formed a coalition in Carinthia with the FPÖ and elected Haider as minister president. In 2015, the SPÖ agreed to a coalition with the FPÖ in Burgenland just three days after the election. The notoriously right-wing SPÖ state party leader, Hans Niessl, has long advocated coalitions with the right-wing extremists. Many other significant figures in the SPÖ favour a coalition with the FPÖ, including current Defence Minister Hans-Peter Doskozil.

In Linz, the social democratic mayor Klaus Luger governs in a coalition with the FPÖ, which he has warmly praised. The trade union wing of the party also works closely with the right-wing extremists. "In the workers' chamber [an official body for employee representation], and in the unions, contacts with FPÖ officials are also being nurtured," the magazine *Profil* wrote recently. Considerable value was placed on "a certain degree of discussion, because if they come to power, a negotiating partner for employee interests is required."

The sharp shift to the right by the SPÖ under Kern, a former rail company boss, coincides with the rise of Sebastian Kurz in the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). The foreign minister in the current grand coalition in Vienna secured his position in the leadership of the party in a palace coup and then triggered early elections. Kurz has also refused to rule out governing with the FPÖ. Like the FPÖ, he advocates harsh policies towards refugees and foreigners, and calls for major social spending cuts.

The formation of an extreme right-wing, anti-working class government is also being supported by pseudo-left forces, which in 2000 were still participating in demonstrations against the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government. "Red-blue [SPÖ-FPÖ] would be more appetising than black-blue [ÖVP-FPÖ]," stated Robert Misik, a former member of the Pabloite Group of Revolutionary Marxists (GRM). Misik is today a close friend and flattering biographer of Chancellor Kern.

Under conditions of worsening social and political crisis in Europe, the official "left," which has served as a trailblazer for alliances with the far right, is now moving to openly advocate such cooperation. Workers and young people must draw the lessons from this process. There is no "lesser evil" in the struggle against the far-right, social cuts and war. It is necessary to mobilise the international working class on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist programme.

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