

German state election: the Left Party's policies open the way for the fascistic AfD

By Johannes Stern
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The election in the East German state of Thuringia on Sunday saw the repeat of a trend already apparent in recent state elections in Brandenburg and Saxony. Germany's ruling parties at a federal and state level are being punished by the electorate for their right-wing and anti-working-class policies. The main beneficiary, however, is the far-right Alternative for Germany, which has been able to win protest votes and is being systematically cultivated by the ruling class, to divert growing popular opposition behind the far right.

After five years in office, the so-called "red-red-green" (a coalition of the Left Party, Social Democratic Party and Greens) state government led by premier Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) has lost its majority. While the Left Party was able to slightly improve its result from the last state election in 2014 (+2.8 percent) and gained 31 percent, the SPD registered its worst-ever election result, just 8.2 percent (-4.2 compared to 2014). The Greens barely managed to re-enter the state parliament with 5.3 percent (-0.4), while the vote for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) fell dramatically to 21.8 percent (losing nearly 12 percent compared to 2014).

The winner of the election was the fascist AfD led by Björn Höcke, whose party more than doubled its share of the vote with 23.4 percent (+12.8).

Surrounded by AfD federal chairman Alexander Gauland and the foreign policy speaker of the AfD, Armin-Paul Hampel, Höcke announced to cheering AfD members at an election party in Erfurt: "Now all the junk and rot will be cleared out, my friends. We will win back our country. Everything old and rotten is decaying before our eyes, and that's good." We have "turned the East blue (the AfD's party colour) and in a few years" we will be "an all-German people's party" and create a "new democracy".

Later in the evening Höcke appeared on one of Germany's main TV news program exhibiting the same aggressive arrogance. He said his party has "been given the mandate to form government" and now stands "ready for a new beginning".

What Höcke and the AfD represent is well known. In his speeches, Höcke demands a "a complete about turn regarding remembering the past". Referring to the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, he complained that Germans are "the only people in the world who have planted a monument of shame in the heart of their capital." In his book "Never twice in the same river", a modern equivalent of Hitler's "Mein Kampf", he rants about the "death of the nation due to population exchange" and calls for the violent deportation of "strangers to our culture" in a "large-scale remigration project", which would "involve a policy of tempered cruelty."

Working off the same playbook, AfD federal leader Alexander Gauland has glorified the activities of the Wehrmacht in World War II and trivialized Hitler and the Nazis as a "piece of bird shit in the more than 1,000 years of successful German history". Responsibility for the fact that figures like Höcke and Gauland set the tone politically rests with Germany's established political parties. Although the CDU, SPD, Greens, the neo liberal FDP and the Left Party have (so far) ruled out forming a ruling coalition with the AfD, they all systematically worked to create the social, ideological and political conditions for the rise to prominence of this right-wing extremist party.

The Social-Democratic racist Thilo Sarrazin also participated in the Thuringia election campaign to promote his latest book, "Hostile Takeover", a vicious anti-Islamic polemic. Sarrazin was invited by former AfD member Oskar Helmerich, who switched to the SPD parliamentary group in 2016. Appearing on behalf of the CDU in the election campaign was the former head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency (BfV) and AfD sympathiser, Hans-Georg Maaßen.

For its part, the red-red-green state government in Thuringia has effectively adopted the racist and anti-working class policies of the AfD over the past five years. Since taking over as state premier in December 2014, Bodo Ramelow has presided over the second-highest deportation rate for a state in Germany. In the past year

alone his government initiated 1,650 deportations, and his state's brutal deportations have been repeatedly criticised by refugee organisations.

On the domestic front, Ramelow and the Left Party pursued a rigorous law-and-order policy, boasting of even outdoing the CDU. "While the CDU reduced the number of police trainees to 120 candidates per year up to 2014, we have reversed the downward trend," the Left Party election program boasts. "We have gradually increased the number of trainees to 300 police candidates in 2019."

In the same section, under the heading "For a civilian-oriented police force with adequate and proportionate equipment," it states: "In order for Thuringia to become one of the safest states in future, it needs a well-equipped and functioning police force with efficient structures. Above all, it requires motivated and civilian-oriented police officers who are eager to perform their duties professionally." The word civilian-oriented means in this context being "omnipresent and ready for action", the document explains.

As is the case at a federal level, this build-up of state repression is directed above all against growing opposition in the working class. The social situation in Thuringia is explosive. The state is one of the poorest in Germany. According to current figures from the federal statistics office, every sixth household (16.4 percent) in the state is at risk of poverty; one in five children and adolescents under the age of 18 faces poverty. In his election campaign, Ramelow openly boasted of embracing policies to further the interests of big business. He said he had heard "entrepreneurs saying: we have never had a prime minister who has been so close to business," Ramelow stated in an interview with Deutschlandfunk radio.

The bourgeois press, which warned against the prospect of Germany's first "Left Party premier" just five years ago, are now praising Ramelow's government policies. In a comment titled "Socialism must wait", the weekly *Die Zeit* concluded with satisfaction: "After five years, it is possible to draw up a clear balance sheet ... Left Party conference speeches which list a succession of progressive and socially just gains belong in the same category as the doomsday talk by the opposition CDU and AfD. In both cases, it is merely propaganda."

A source of particular satisfaction for *Die Zeit* is the Left Party's reneging on its demand for the dissolution of the BfV, another case of pure propaganda. Ramelow had already shelved the demand shortly before the state election in 2014, though the Thuringia intelligence agency had spied on him for years and played a central role in building up the far-right structures that surrounded the National Socialist Underground terror cell.

To combat the fascist threat, it is necessary to speak out clearly regarding the role of the Left Party. With its fundamentally right-wing and pro-capitalist policies, the Left Party, whose predecessor organisation restored capitalism in East Germany 30 years ago, bears the main responsibility for the rise of the AfD. Posing as a nominally "leftist" force, the Left Party has in practice unleashed a social catastrophe, thereby intensifying social frustration and the political confusion which plays into the hands of the extreme right. According to initial polls, the AfD not only mobilised most of the former non-voters in the state (77,000), its also received 17,000 votes from former Left Party voters.

Ramelow and the Left Party have reacted to the election result with a further shift to the right. Lacking enough seats in parliament to form another coalition with the German parties most closely associated with the Hartz IV welfare laws and militarism, i.e., the SPD and Greens, Ramelow is now contemplating cooperation with the CDU, factions of which favour policies resembling those of the AfD and Höcke.

Workers and young people must draw the necessary conclusions. Under conditions of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, all of the established parties are closing ranks and increasingly orienting themselves to the policies of the AfD. The revival of militarism, fascism and war by the ruling elite can only be prevented by the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. The crucial issue is building the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and the International Committee of the Fourth International as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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