

Germany: Local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia express growing opposition to official politics

By Peter Schwarz
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The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats collectively lost 10 percent of the vote in the local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) on Sunday. The parties of the grand coalition at the federal level—CDU and SPD—achieved the worst combined result in their history.

Apart from the Hamburg state elections on February 23 and the Bavarian local elections on March 15, the NRW election is the only one to be held in Germany this year. Some 14 million eligible voters in the most populous state—one in five in Germany—were called upon to reelect district councils, city councils, municipal councils, and district representatives.

The CDU, which emerged as the strongest party in the election with 34.3 percent, lost 3.2 percent compared to the last local elections six years ago. The Social Democrats dropped by 7.1 percent to 24.3 percent, in the state that was once their stronghold, governed by the SPD for almost 50 years. The main winners are the Greens, who gained 8.3 points and became the third strongest party with 20 percent.

The election result was above all an expression of growing opposition to all official politics. Half of all eligible voters stayed at home. At 51.5 percent, turnout was about the same as six years ago, when 50 percent participated. Many people saw no point in voting between parties that work together in every conceivable combination at federal, state, and local level and pursue right-wing, anti-working-class policies.

Looking more closely at the election results, the decline of the CDU and SPD is even more drastic than the overall figures reveal. The two parties, which, with a four-year interruption, have ruled together in the federal government since 2005, were mainly supported

by older voters, who traditionally remain loyal to them. Among the over-60s, the CDU received 44 percent of the vote and the SPD 29 percent.

Among 16-24 year-olds, however, only 22 percent voted for the CDU and 16 percent for the SPD. The younger generation no longer expects anything from these parties, which are responsible for the rapid spread of precarious employment, billions in gifts to the banks and the return to militarism. Instead, 33 percent voted for the Greens, the strongest party in this electoral segment. Among the over-60s, however, the Greens won only 12 percent.

The Greens' electoral success has two main reasons. First, they are the party of the prosperous urban middle classes. They were able to gain influence especially in big cities like Cologne, Bonn, Aachen, and Dortmund. Even in the Ruhr area, once the centre of heavy industry, there are now many relatively wealthy start-ups and service providers. By contrast, miners who traditionally voted for the SPD no longer exist, and the last steelworks are currently being closed.

In the impoverished regions of the Ruhr, with many Hartz IV (welfare) recipients, some people voted out of anger for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The extreme right-wing party doubled its vote share from 2.5 to 5 percent. This is admittedly less than in the 2017 federal election when it received 9.4 percent of second votes in NRW. However, it did not contest the local elections across the board, so that its share of votes is much higher in some municipalities. The AfD achieved its best result in Gelsenkirchen with 13.9 percent.

The second reason for the Greens' success is based on a misconception. Especially young voters, who are

very concerned about the environment, still regard them as an ecological party. According to an opinion poll, environmental and climate protection was the most important issue in the election, ahead of economic issues and school policy.

The Greens have long since ceased to differ from the other parties on this issue as well. In the automobile-producing state of Baden-Württemberg, where Green Winfried Kretschmann is their only state premier so far, he has long since become a lobbyist for big auto.

The Greens are concentrating all their energy on replacing the SPD in the federal government as the coalition partner of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). Whether it is about austerity programmes at the expense of the working class, opening day-care centres, schools and factories without adequate coronavirus protection, arming the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and planning new war missions, they have long since ceased to differ from the parties of the grand coalition. In foreign policy, they even attack them from the right and demand more aggressive action against Russia and China as well as more “humanitarian” war missions.

A commentary by press agency Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, which supplies newspapers in NRW with articles, described their role quite aptly. “The Greens are basically the winners in a double game,” it says. “On the one hand, they lament the growing social divisions in the major cities of NRW—but at the same time, they benefit from it. Everywhere they are at the forefront of those who are cushioned from the ebbs and flows of the economy.

Significantly, the Left Party as well as the SPD has lost votes, receiving 3.8 percent, 0.8 less than six years ago. The Left Party no longer differs from the other parties and is doing its utmost to be part of the next federal government together with the parties of war and welfare cuts, the SPD and Greens. In the federal states and local authorities in which it co-governs, it acts just as ruthlessly against workers, the poor and refugees as the other parties.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP), the coalition partner of the CDU in the NRW state government, improved its score by 0.8 points to 5.6 percent.

Six different parties now sit in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and most state legislatures. If the Bavarian

Christian Social Union (CSU) is counted as a party in its own right, there are even seven. But this has not increased political choice; they all represent more or less the same right-wing policies, with the AfD—as in refugee policy—usually setting the tone.

In broad sections of the population, indignation is building up over cuts to jobs, wages and social benefits, over the opening of schools without coronavirus protection, over the ruin of education and health care. Countless people are appalled by the inhumane refugee policy of the European Union and the return of German militarism.

But these concerns find no expression in official politics. Opposition can only develop outside and against the establishment parties and the trade unions associated with them. And it does. To provide it with an orientation and leadership, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) advocates the establishment of independent action committees in factories and schools. Their task is to defend jobs and wages, ensure the safety of parents, educators and pupils, and form networks nationally and internationally.

Together with its sister organisations in the International Committee of the Fourth International, the SGP fights for a socialist programme that places the needs of society above the profit interests of the corporations and banks.

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