

State election in North Rhine-Westphalia reveals growing class divisions in Germany

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Rarely before has an election result in Germany shown so clearly the class division of society as that of last Sunday's state election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the country's most populous state. The working class stayed at home because workers did not see themselves represented by any of the establishment parties. For their part, the affluent urban middle classes turned to the Greens, the most belligerent of all parties when it comes to the Ukraine war.

The most significant result of the election was the high number of abstentions: 5.8 million of nearly 13 million eligible voters stayed at home, about the same number as voted for the three strongest parties combined—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens. At 55.5 percent, voter turnout fell to an all-time low. In the 2017 state election, 65.2 percent voted, and in the 2021 federal election, 76.4 percent went to the polls.

Abstention was highly unevenly distributed. In impoverished industrial areas, former SPD strongholds, turnout was below 50 percent and, in some cases, even below 40 percent. In wealthier regions, on the other hand, participation reached up to 70 percent. There, the Greens are the strongest party. In the university cities of Cologne, Münster and Aachen, they won seven direct mandates for the first time in the state's history.

In the industrial Ruhr cities of Gelsenkirchen and Duisburg, only 44 percent and just under 47 percent went to the polls, respectively. The deeper one looks into the individual regions, the lower the turnout. In Duisburg North (Marxloh, Hamborn) turnout was 38 percent, and in Essen's northern district less than 33 percent. In the constituency of Duisburg Beeck, only 102 out of 800 eligible voters found their way to the polling station. In the southern Essen Constituency IV, however, where the better-off and wealthy live, almost 70 percent took part in the election.

Except for the Greens, all parties lost massive numbers of votes. Even the election winner—the CDU, which improved its result from 33 to 35.7 percent—lost 244,000 votes. The SPD, which had been predicted to go head-to-head with the

CDU, experienced a disaster. It lost 744,000 votes, finished 9 points behind the CDU and achieved its worst election result ever, with 26.7 percent.

The Liberal Democrats (FDP) fared even worse, losing 647,000 votes, dropping from 12.6 to 5.9 percent, and only just scraping over the 5 percent hurdle to enter the state legislature. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) also lost 238,000 votes but remains in the state parliament with 5.4 percent. The Left Party, which had narrowly failed to clear the five percent hurdle in 2017, lost 270,000 votes and came in at only 2.1 percent. The Greens, on the other hand, gained 761,000 votes and improved their result from 6.4 to 18.3 percent.

Most media outlets interpreted the election result as a slap in the face for SPD Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The result was “primarily attributable to voter disappointment at the Chancellor's hesitant and dithering course on the Ukraine issue,” reads a typical commentary in the *Weser Kurier*.

The professional opinion-makers in the media have become so caught up in their enthusiasm for war that they are completely blind to social reality. The election result is a slap in the face for the SPD—not because it supposedly hesitates to support the war in Ukraine, but because it systematically fuels it. The federal government led by Scholz has decided on the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler and is arming Ukraine with heavy weapons.

Many workers know or feel that this war is directed against them and that they will have to pay the bill. Unlike the well-paid propagandists in the editorial offices, they have not forgotten the crimes committed by the US, Germany and their NATO allies in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and numerous other countries.

Nor are they impressed by the lie that arming Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars in weapons is for “peace” and the defence of “democracy” and “freedom.” They are not prepared to support NATO's proxy war against the nuclear power Russia and be driven into a third world war.

Surveys—unreliable and contradictory as they are—repeatedly make clear that large sections of the German

population reject the government's war policy. For example, at the end of April, in the Deutschlandtrend survey by opinion research institute Infratest dimap, only 45 percent were in favour of supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine, and just as many were against it, despite an intensive media campaign. A month earlier, 55 percent had been in favour.

An import ban on Russian oil and gas also met with great scepticism in the survey. Energy prices have already reached record levels, and an abrupt halt to imports would endanger hundreds of thousands of jobs in the chemical, steel and other industries.

But this opposition to the Ukraine war found no expression in the election. The CDU as well as the AfD and the Left Party generally support the war course of the federal coalition of the SPD, FDP and Greens. This is one reason why many voters stayed at home. According to the analysis of voter movements, the SPD lost most of its previous voters, 310,000, to the camp of non-voters.

Otherwise, a kind of pass-the-parcel took place between the bourgeois parties, from which the Greens, who have become the leading war party of German imperialism, benefited the most. 260,000 former SPD voters, 140,000 from the CDU and 100,000 from the FDP, switched to the Greens. The CDU in turn gained 260,000 voters from the FDP.

The FDP, always hated for its arrogance, was pulverised between the other war and rearmament parties. One reason for its electoral defeat is also its disastrous schools' policy. NRW Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (FDP) even managed to turn parts of the FDP's wealthy clientele against her with her ruthless coronavirus policies and austerity measures in schools.

The rise of the Greens is a warning signal. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Economics Minister Robert Habeck (both Greens) are the most aggressive warmongers in the Berlin "traffic light" federal coalition. Since the party gave the green light for the Yugoslav war in 1999, it has become a driving force of German militarism. With the Ukraine war, this is taking on a new dimension.

The transition of the wealthy petty bourgeoisie into the camp of militarism has a long tradition in Germany. Before the First World War, one million members of the German Fleet Association became intoxicated with the construction of a Navy that would challenge the British for dominance of the seas. After Hitler came to power, civil servants, professors and other professionals in their droves came to terms with the new regime and joined the Nazi Party.

The transformation of the Greens into Germany's leading war party has objective roots. The party relies on wealthy upper middle-class layers who, in addition to enjoying well-paid jobs, often have property holdings and share portfolios,

having enriched themselves at the expense of the working class over the past decades.

Their enthusiasm for militarism is closely linked to their fear of the class struggle that threatens their privileged position. The health, education, car, steel and other industries are hotbeds of social discontent. Unbearable work stress and the threat of massive job cuts come together with high inflation that is rapidly eroding living standards.

The Greens will therefore have no problem forming a coalition in NRW with Hendrik Wüst's CDU. They will also work with his right-wing interior minister, Herbert Reul, whose authoritarian police law they opposed until only recently. In two other West German states—Baden-Wuerttemberg and Hesse—the Greens have long worked amicably with the CDU.

One should also not overestimate the influence of the Greens. In NRW, just one in ten eligible voters voted for them. Even among 18- to 24-year-olds, where the Greens became the strongest party, with 28 percent, their influence is less than it seems. Indeed, 54 percent of first-time voters did not go to the polls.

The state election in NRW confirms that it has become impossible for the working class to assert its interests within the ossified parliamentary system. The collapse of the Left Party, which was never more than a pseudo-left fig leaf for anti-working-class policies, also confirms this.

The struggle against war, social cuts and the stepping up of the state's powers at home and abroad requires the development of an independent movement of the working class that unites it internationally and advocates a socialist programme, placing social needs above the profit interests of the capitalist class. For this, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built as a new workers' party.



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