



Austria: ÖVP wins, SPÖ losses show need for socialist answers

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The elections to Austria's parliament, the National Council, on September 29 brought a huge victory for the conservative ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz. They scored 37.1 percent, an increase of 5.7 percent and the biggest lead over the second placed party in the history of the Republic. That party, the Socialist SPÖ, posted the worst result in its history, dropping 5.1 percent to 21.7. The racist populist Freedom Party, FPÖ, was also heavily punished losing 9.9 percent at 16.1 percent and now faces a crisis. The Greens have returned to parliament with 14 percent, a gain of 10.2 percent, the largest of any party. The liberal party NEOS has further strengthened its position with 7.8 percent, a gain of 2.5 percent. Although these numbers are projections, because of postal votes still to be counted, no substantial changes are to be expected.

Compared to the last National Council elections, the results show significant changes that every progressive-minded person will recognise as a shift in the balance of political power between the classes.

Political balance of power

With Sebastian Kurz, the ÖVP has advanced the interests of the rich and the capitalists by putting together an alliance that has not existed since the beginning of the 2000s in this country. In the last two years, with his bogus "reforms" and by surfing the racist wave, Kurz has united not only the large and middle bourgeoisie and large sections of the "middle class", but many workers as well. It is not only the rich and the corporations who could profit from his tax cuts, but also this or that group, the family bonus will go above all to high income families, the tax reforms will benefit small and middle incomes, then, before the election, support for the pensioners.

Against the background of a slight economic upturn, and with the strong help of the media, he was able to establish the idea that all would benefit from concessions to the capitalists ("location policy") or at least those who deserve it would. While redistributing with one hand, with the other he demolished important gains made by the workers' movement by, for example, extending the maximum daily working time, strengthening the bosses with regard to social insurance or the planned, but not yet implemented, reform of unemployment insurance and emergency aid and the weakening of the Labour Chamber. In short, he has understood better than others how to generate support here and there within the population in order to work against the working class as a whole.

However, the enormous strengthening of the ÖVP takes place against the background of a shift in the reactionary camp. The FPÖ, which in the past was able to use its aggressive racism and nationalism to benefit strongly from the fears of decline and the lack of political perspective among the petty bourgeoisie and many workers, has once again proven that it is not really the "little man's party" and is in a serious crisis. In mid-May, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a video of FPÖ boss Heinz-Christian Strache and the former club chairman Johann Gudenus, which shows the two in corrupt deals with a supposed Russian oligarch on Ibiza.

What is unofficially true of political business for all bourgeois parties was unacceptable in public. Added to this are the allegations of corruption in connection with the gaming group Novomatic and the expenses affair of H.-C. Strache in their own party. While the FPÖ managed a better position in the European elections at the end of May, the scandals were now too much even for some diehard supporters. As a result, 258,000 voters switched to the ÖVP, and a further 235,000

former FPÖ voters were so disillusioned they abstained altogether.

SPÖ disaster

At the same time, social democracy has once again demonstrated its inability to mobilise working people and youth for its political objectives. This failure is doubly serious in these elections, because the FPÖ scandals as well as those about donations to the ÖVP (largely financed by the billionaire Heidi Goess-Horten and the capitalists Klaus Ortner and Stefan Pierer) have shown how both parties are tied up with capital. In such a situation it should have been relatively easy to explain the common interests of the workers as distinct from the ÖVP and FPÖ and to reclaim the Social Democrats' position as their party.

This includes the inclusion of those 1.2 million people living in Austria, who have no right to vote because of the obstacles to gaining citizenship and in their majority represent a socially oppressed and politically unrepresented part of the working class. However, the SPÖ leadership clique has long lacked the necessary credibility. Even where they do make a nod to the Left, such as on a wealth tax, they offer no perspective on how to fight for it because there is no place in the traditional Grand Coalition for a policy explicitly in the interest of the working class and mobilising the workers is no longer a social democratic strategy.

Instead, the Social Democratic functionaries put on a campaign that talks about "togetherness" and "humanity". This reflects the desire of the party bureaucracy to reconcile with the capitalists and enrich themselves again in the state apparatus and administration. Because party leader Rendi-Wagner cannot imagine any politics other than the appeal for social partnership, she even announced after the election that "the direction is right". Thus continues the decline of the SPÖ.

Aside from Sebastian Kurz, the big winners in these elections were the Greens. With the big international mobilisations of Fridays for Future, the public is now aware that it is time for serious action against climate change. Climate protection was one of the most important topics in the election campaign. It even overshadowed immigration, so that almost all parties had to profess to a more serious environmental policy.

There were also many traditional Green voters who had voted Social Democrat in recent elections and now wanted to reverse the expulsion of the Greens from the National Council. Among the under-30s, the Greens share the top percentage with the ÖVP. For younger people, who will be particularly affected by the effects of climate change, they may even come first. After decades of emphasising the need for environmental protection, the Greens naturally enjoy the greatest credibility on the climate question. Ultimately, however, the Greens are a (minor) bourgeois party that believes it is possible to reconcile the salvation of the planet with the exploitative laws of capitalism, and therefore is torn this way and that between defending capitalists' property rights and challenging their right to control the economy.

Crisis of black-blue

Despite the gains, Sebastian Kurz now finds himself in a difficult situation. He himself would probably prefer to continue his black-blue project, but the FPÖ leadership is clearly against any participation in government for the time being. Ultimately, it is also questionable whether a stable coalition with the FPÖ would be possible at the moment. The scenario of a party split is not likely, especially since Strache announced his withdrawal from politics, but it is by no means excluded.

A coalition with social democracy would probably be the most unattractive option for Kurz. After all, he himself blew up the last red-black government and, so to speak, declared war on the SPÖ with his black-and-blue policy. In any case it would be very difficult for the Social Democrats, given their own internal crisis, to get away with giving their archenemy, Kurz's ÖVP, the majority. At the same time, given its commitment to upholding the state, in the last resort it might be prepared to enter a coalition, like the SPD in Germany. A coalition with the Greens seems most likely at the moment, even though they have already announced that they would exact a high price.

In fact, Kurz could cling to a right-wing conservative policy with the Greens and would at least have to offer some cosmetic policies on the environment and possibly other areas as well. So, it is to be expected that the discussions

between the parties will take a long time whether it is Greens, the Blues or, in the end, even the Reds, who eventually shake hands.

Challenges

Left-wing and progressive people and supporters of the workers' movement must now draw the consequences of this election campaign. The gains for ÖVP and Greens (as well as for NEOS) as well as the losses for the SPÖ indicate a further strengthening of bourgeois ideologies and illusions in the population. Social-Democracy itself is pursuing bourgeois politics based on the reformist ideology of a reconciliation of labour and capital. It is part of the problem, not of the solution. The working class needs its own party for an independent proletarian and internationalist policy - the Social Democracy has not been that for a very long time!

For the leftist and class-conscious sections of social democracy, the current political disaster is a warning that they will go down with the party if they continue to shy away from breaking with the SPÖ's bureaucratic policies. The coming weeks and months could provide an opportunity, if the SPÖ opens the way to a grand coalition. Then they must say "No to any coalition with capitalist parties! For an independent socialist policy! "

Once again, the candidacies of the Communist Party, KPÖ, and "Change" offered no way out. This is not only because of the difficulties that face any small party. It is also an expression of the fact that their slightly leftist reformism or populism is hardly convincing as an alternative perspective. Only a policy of internationalist class struggle can show a real way out of the crisis of the capitalist social order. The fact that such a policy is currently not to be seen on the political horizon, while the ÖVP is celebrating its political high, should not discourage us. Those who rise very quickly, can also fall very quickly. It is precisely these elections that have shown how quickly political conditions can change when political consciousness is shaken. There will be more shocks within capitalism, especially in times of impending recession and the escalation between the major imperialist powers.

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