

Dramatic gains for Austrian far right are a danger for the working class

Tue, 11/11/2008 - 12:27

The death of Jorg Haider, the leader of the Alliance for the Future of Austria, was no loss to humanity. Indeed, many will be pleased to see the end of this right wing demagogue who celebrated the memory of the Waffen SS and praised the "employment policies" of the Third Reich. However, his passing may prove to be a benefit to the extreme right in Austria.

Haider founded the Alliance in 2005 after leaving the Freedom Party in which he had faced mounting opposition to his policy of participating in a coalition government with the more mainstream right-wing party, the Austrian People's Party. Heinz-Christian Strache, who had opposed Haider's strategy, became the new leader of the Freedom Party. In October's elections, the Freedom Party won some 18% of the vote while the Alliance gained 11%. This means that, together, the extreme right practically equalled the vote for the Social Democratic Party with 29% and outstripped the People's Party by more than 2%. Although the Alliance's support is largely restricted to the province of Carinthia and there are several rivals to Strache for the leadership of the Freedom Party, it would not take a political genius to recognise the potential impact on Austria of a unified far right party. Nor should that be taken to mean a mere strengthening of the kind of backward prejudices against European integration and immigration that might be found on the right wing of politics throughout Europe. Strache's ranting against "Islamic dress" and his preference for schnitzels as against "falafel and couscous or whatever that stuff's called" certainly expresses the narrowness of his horizons but his longstanding campaigns to lift the ban on the Nazi party and to legalise the use of Nazi regalia and the display of the swastika point to an altogether more serious threat. The precise character of that threat was seen during the election campaign when, for example, groups of Nazis attacked demonstrators protesting at Strache's closing election rally in Salzburg and 90 graves in a Muslim Cemetery were desecrated as part of a right wing campaign against an Islamic cultural centre. Summing up the right's electoral success, the League for the Socialist Revolution (LSR) the Austrian section of the League for the Fifth International, quite rightly concluded that this was, "the penalty for decades of social democratic politics, ever closer collaboration with big capital, support for antidemocratic neoliberal policy and the implementation of a racist integration policy which through its cowardly capitulation to the racism of the right not only repulsed many workers but, at the same time, created a climate in which racist hatred could become socially acceptable". Certainly, the rise of the right has to be seen against the wider background of the political crisis that led to early elections. In the last general election, held in autumn 2006, the Social Democrats, although the biggest party with 35%, could not form a majority government. After months of indecision, in January 2006, they finally reneged on their election promises and formed a coalition with the People's Party, as they had between 1986 and 1999. Although highly unstable, this coalition continued the neoliberal policies that had made the previous government so unpopular. As the senior partner in the coalition, the Social Democrats took the brunt of popular discontent as they again broke all the promises they had made in their election campaign. By June this year, the People's Party calculated that the unpopularity of the Social Democrats was so great that they could afford to bring down

the coalition and force an early election. In fact, the plan backfired. Although the Social Democrats lost 6% compared to three years earlier, the People's Party lost more than 8% and, as we have seen, it was the far right that benefited. Even though it was their worst result since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1918, the Social Democrats' vote held up rather better than was predicted - when the election was called they had around 24% in the opinion polls.

How is this to be explained? First, it seems that many of the Social Democrats' core working-class voters saw the People's Party's manoeuvre for what it was and, fearing a majority for the People's Party, stuck with "their" party, despite its record. Secondly, the Social Democratic leader, Gusenbauer, was replaced by Werner Feymann who immediately proposed a five-point programme including an immediate reduction in VAT on food and the abolition of tuition fees for students and, in the longer term, increased family and carers' allowances. This despite the fact that only months previously, as the government, the Social Democrats had voted to maintain student fees and to make cuts in pensions and health services! For all its opportunism, and who knows how many of the five points will actually be in force in six months' time, this package can be seen to have had an immediate impact on opinion polls during the summer and may have been enough to stem the loss of electoral support. To date, no new government has been formed. Given the three-way split in the election results, every possible combination of parties has been publicly discussed, even a coalition between the Social Democrats and the far right. At present, negotiations between the Social Democrats and the People's Party suggest that their coalition will be renewed. What is certain is that each of the parties is totally committed to supporting the interests of Austrian capital and, therefore, whatever government is formed will continue the anti-working-class policies of the past. Indeed, given the mounting economic crisis and impending recession, past policies will begin to look mild in comparison to what capital will now demand.

The Left Electoral Alliance

As opposition mounted to the neoliberal policies of the social democratic-People's Party coalition government in June, a number of Left groups and activists, including the Austrian section of the Committee for a Workers' International (SLP) and the LSR, together with activists from the Austrian Social Forum, agreed on the need to discuss united front campaigns and political initiatives in the context of the growing crisis of social democracy.

When the government collapsed and new elections were called in July, the LSR proposed that this campaign should form an electoral alliance in order to stand against the Social Democrats on a clear, revolutionary, anti-capitalist programme. Although there was some opposition to the proposal for an electoral campaign, it did attract support from a range of organisations including sections of the Communist Party, important immigrant groups and even functionaries from the social democratic party and was carried by a wide margin at a conference on 19th July. As a result an electoral alliance was formed which was to be known simply as the LEFT.

At a press conference a few days later, representatives of different currents within the LEFT presented their views on the political positions the LEFT should adopt. Nina Guni?, the leading candidate for the LSR, called for the expropriation of the super rich and the major corporations and for full rights for immigrants including equal status for minority languages in public institutions and schools. This attracted a great deal of press coverage and a "scandal" about such "ultra-communist" demands. In the event, however, the programme actually adopted by The Left at a conference in late August was much less radical and read more like a typical social democratic platform of 20 years ago.

Despite this, and its criticisms of the lack of active campaigning, the LSR continued to support the LEFT while its own candidates made it clear that they stood on a revolutionary programme. This allowed the LSR

to mount its own energetic electoral campaign. Although largely restricted to Vienna, the group gained valuable experience from holding street meetings and rallies as well as leafleting workplaces and schools and gained a number of new members and contacts as a result. In one school, where a member of the Socialist youth organisation, REVOLUTION, addressed a student assembly, an indicative ballot was held and the LSR won 46 % of the vote.

When it came to the actual election, however, the Alliance's vote was very poor; just over 2100 votes in the five provinces where it was able to stand and 1000 of those were in Vienna. Moreover, the LEFT did not succeed in attracting new forces to the alliance. In a statement on the results, the LSR, while acknowledging the obvious difficulties facing a campaign that had only been founded 10 weeks before the election, also identified the weakness of the political programme, the lack of systematic campaigning until the last three weeks and the sheer emptiness of the campaign's main slogans, "A LEFT you can vote for" and, "At last, something new" as major factors in the disappointing result.

Looking forward, and recognising that whatever government is formed will continue the attacks across the board, the LSR proposed at a conference of the LEFT on 18th October that it needs to change course towards active class struggle politics that do not shrink from saying what is necessary for a successful working class struggle under present conditions. However, the LSR's resolutions were defeated by a majority of some two to one. This means that the LEFT will continue its left-reformist policy. As a result, the LSR no longer considers the LEFT to be a political project that it can support and build. Instead the LSR will continue to collaborate in united front campaigns with forces both inside and outside the LEFT as it takes forward its work to build a new, revolutionary party.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/dramatic-gains-austrian-far-right-are-danger-working-class>