

Elections in Austria: It is time to fight back!

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The results in Austria's elections on October 15 came as no surprise. As predicted by the polls, Sebastian Kurz's conservative People's Party, ÖVP, was the biggest party with 31.5 percent while second place was taken by their former coalition partners, the Social Democrats, SPÖ, with 26.9 percent. Just behind the SPÖ, with 26 percent, was the right-wing Freedom Party, FPÖ, led by H.C. Strache. This was the FPÖ's second best ever result and makes a coalition with the ÖVP the most likely outcome.

That would mean continued intensification of racism, dismantling of the welfare state and further poisoning of public opinion. This may be a discouraging prospect for many but it also has the potential to mobilise the working class against the right-wing policies. Despite all the reactionary ideology, we can expect more class struggle in Austria in the medium term, not less.

The Greens only managed 3.8 percent of the vote, down 8.6 percent, and so will not even enter parliament. Their result probably reflects supporters turning to the SPÖ in the face of the right wing threat but was also not helped by internal conflicts in which the party de facto expelled its own youth organisation, the party leader stepped down, and the Green MP Peter Pilz founded his own list to secure his mandate. Still, with the list 'Pilz', which stands at 4.4 percent, there is a left bourgeois list in parliament.

Adding in the 5.3 percent won by New Austria, NEOS, which stands for an economically liberal EU and a "lean state", the new parliament will have a two-thirds majority committed to clearly neoliberal positions and advocate a strengthening of the economy at the expense of the working population.

Who voted for what?

The ÖVP increased its vote by nearly one million votes, gaining both from the Freedom Party and from former supporters of the super-rich entrepreneur Frank Stronach in the last election. The FPÖ also won from 'Team Stronach' as well as from the Alliance for the Future of Austria, BZÖ, which split from the party under Jörg Haider in 2005. These shifts clearly show how close the voters of the People's Party and the Freedom Party are.

The SPÖ share of the vote, 26.9 percent, was the same as in 2013 but that was historically its worst ever result. Among 'workers', which in Austria, does not include civil servants, officials or 'employees', the party only won about 20 percent, confirming its long term loss of support. The party did, however, pick up votes from the Greens, who also lost some votes to both the renegade Green, Peter Pilz, and the People's Party. The Greens have not won a majority in a single municipality in this election, which is a significant deterioration. Interestingly, they also lost in the regions where they are in the regional government.

KPÖ PLUS

The Communist Party which, together with the expelled Young Greens, participated in the elections as KPÖ PLUS, only reached 0.7 percent, a result even lower than in the last election when the Communist Party stood alone. Our assessment that this new alliance could create a pole of attraction and mobilise those to the Left of the SPÖ in the direction of a new workers' party has thus been proven wrong. This failure can certainly be attributed, in part, to the lack of willingness to stand as an even larger alliance, but clearly some people chose to vote SPÖ for tactical reasons. With its thoroughly reformist program, KPÖ PLUS could not differentiate itself fundamentally from the Social Democrats, let alone present a socialist alternative. Despite all this, KPÖ PLUS must use its reputation and reach to organise resistance on the streets against the attacks of the coming government.

A look ahead

The economic programme of the likely coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ is already quite clear. Both parties are in favour of a "tax relief" which would primarily benefit people or companies with high incomes. Both called for attacks on the minimum income and, while the ÖVP calls for non-Austrian citizens to receive social benefits only after five years, the FPÖ wants to make the minimum income only available to Austrians.

Regarding new taxes, they both oppose an inheritance tax, even one which only applies to inheritances higher than one million euros, affecting only about 1 percent of the population. Taxes on wealth are not advocated by Kurz or Strache, both of whom want to reduce or even eliminate the corporation tax on retained profits. This would lead to a loss of revenue of up to four billion euros. The proposed reduction in payroll taxes, which will benefit entrepreneurs and is intended to strengthen Austria as a business location, would also lead to a reduction in the state budget.

Both parties also demand more sanctions for the unemployed. Strache has dropped his demand for the abolition of the obligatory affiliation to the Chamber of Labour, which provides services for workers, but it clearly showed which side he is on. For women, both parties have little to offer, raising of children should remain in the family, which would mean no expansion of child care centres, and there should be a longer period for reflection before abortions.

It is clear that all these proposals would mean reductions in state revenues and corresponding cuts in welfare and social services. The very probable ÖVP-FPÖ coalition is directed against those people who are already at the very bottom of society in any case: workers on low incomes, families with several children, singles and single parents. Non-Austrian citizens or migrants, especially Muslims, will also be particularly affected. It can be assumed that massive attacks on the welfare state will follow while labour rights are being dismantled and racist laws implemented.

What is to be done?

The fact that the SPÖ will not counter the victory of racist and reactionary forces was already clear before the election. The party attempted to appropriate the demands of the right, such as a ban on face coverings in public, directed against burkas and niqabs, but this only strengthened the right. In order to counteract the surge in right wing policies, which is by no means a purely Austrian phenomenon, we need a strong left opposition outside parliament. Even if the new government focusses on minorities first of all, thus satisfying parts of their electorate, it will ultimately attack us all so there is a need for massive resistance and solidarity with all those who are targeted first with repressive and racist laws.

An ÖVP-FPÖ government will not be controlled by a Peter Pilz in Parliament, who also adopts right-wing positions, but can only be put in real trouble by a popular resistance in the streets, in the factories and in

schools/universities. The left should not rest after the election and complain about the bad result of KPÖ PLUS. Rather, we must carry the resistance into the streets and build a powerful alliance against the impending attacks. We therefore call on all left-wing, progressive forces to organise a joint resistance conference, in which counter-strategies and campaigning themes are publicly discussed and forces are gathered. In this situation, however, it is also necessary to discuss the poor results of new, left-wing projects such as Aufbruch or KPÖ PLUS. The construction of an anticapitalist force still requires one thing above all: a clear revolutionary programme.

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