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The international significance of the Berlin election

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In Germany, the Berlin state elections on Sunday are being held under conditions of a dramatic international crisis. The consequences of the 2008 financial crash remain unresolved; the European Union, which since the Second World War has formed the basis of relative stability in Europe, confronts an existential crisis; the conflict with Russia and the war in Syria are escalating; and inside Germany, social tensions are growing as more and more people work in precarious conditions for low wages.

The ruling class has responded to this crisis with the promotion of militarism and by building up the repressive apparatus of the state. Since leading representatives of the government announced the “end of military restraint” two years ago, German soldiers, tanks and warplanes are engaged have been deployed to NATO’s border with Russia for the first time since the Second World War. The German Armed Forces train and arm Kurdish fighters in Iraq and fly reconnaissance missions over Syria. The military and defence budget has been increased by billions of euros.

The government has massively expanded the police and surveillance apparatus. The threat of terrorist attacks and the propaganda campaign against refugees and Muslims, fuelled by the media, serve as the pretext.

This policy is supported by all the parliamentary parties. The call for security, more police and increased monitoring has been the focus of their Berlin election campaign. The widespread

opposition to this policy has deeply discredited these parties. The times when the so-called “people’s parties” – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – could win 40 percent or more of the vote are long gone. In Berlin, where polls place the SPD as the strongest party, it is polling at just 23 percent. The CDU, the Greens, the Left Party and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) are polling between 18 and 14 percent.

Amid the broadening hatred of the political establishment, it is mainly the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) that has profited from the growing anger and indignation with the establishment parties. In the last nine state elections, the AfD has managed to enter each state parliament on its first attempt, exacerbating the crisis of the old parties. While in times of political crisis, the ruling class has previously been able to rely on a “grand coalition” of the SPD and CDU to ensure stable majorities, these parties are now viewed with such widespread contempt that they are no longer capable of securing a governing majority together.

Under these circumstances, the ruling class is seeking new political props to protect its power and suppress the opposition to militarism and social austerity. This is why the outcome of the election may be the formation of a “Red-Red-Green” government, that is, a coalition consisting of the Social Democrats, the Left Party, and the Green Party. This combination on the state level may well prove to be a test run for a coalition of the SPD, Left Party and the Greens at the federal level. Berlin SPD leader Michael Müller, who serves as governing mayor of Berlin in a coalition with the CDU, has expressed his support for such a “Red-Red-Green” alliance.

In one year, in September 2017, the next Bundestag (federal parliament) will be elected. State elections in Germany have always been seen as a trial run for the federal election. So far, the SPD and the Greens have refused an alliance with the Left Party at the federal level and in western States. Only in the east, where the Left Party, as successor to the old ruling state party in the former East Germany enjoys greater influence, has it been included in government at the state level. This is now changing as a result of the deepening crisis. SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel has indicated that he would now be ready for such a government.

In the Berlin election campaign, the Left Party has done everything possible to prove its reliability to the ruling class and its support for increased state powers and militarism. In its Berlin manifesto, it calls for a massive increase in police personnel and the expansion of police powers. Last week, the Left Party’s parliamentary leader in the Bundestag, Dietmar Bartsch, attacked the Merkel government from the right on this issue. He called for “a state that has the capacity to act”, and accused the federal government of having “weakened, humiliated and neglected the police.” Addressing the SPD, Bartsch added, “Yes, the Left Party wants to take responsibility for this political change in government.”

However, the Left Party has a problem. It, too, has massively lost credibility because of its right-wing policies. It is highly discredited in Berlin, where it spent ten years in the state administration between 2002 and 2011 implementing a policy of social austerity. For this reason, it is mainly pseudo-left groups like SAV and Marx21, which have found a home and a livelihood inside the Left Party, that have carried out the leg work in its election campaign. The co-thinkers of the American International Socialist Organisation, the British Socialist Party and Socialist

Workers Party and the French New Anti-Capitalist Party, are all active in Germany's Left Party, energetically promoting it and seeking to provide it with a left fig leaf.

Increasingly, these groups, which are based on affluent sections of the middle classes, the trade union bureaucracy and other better-off layers, reveal themselves for what they really are: a crucial prop of bourgeois rule.

In the United States, these political outfits promoted the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, who described himself as a socialist and won 13 million votes in the primaries, only to then support the candidate of Wall Street and the military, Hillary Clinton. In Britain, they act as cheerleaders for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is encouraging hopes of a shift to the left by the Labour Party, but refuses to fight against its right-wing parliamentary faction, which is plotting to bring him down.

The election campaign carried out by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Berlin is of great significance. As the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the PSG has placed the building of an international movement against war at the centre of its campaign, of a movement that is based on the working class and combines opposition to war with the struggle against capitalism and for a socialist society.

It has stressed that the working class cannot take a step forward without breaking with the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party and their pseudo-left coterie. The PSG campaign is aimed at raising the political consciousness of the working class, and preparing for the future, when growing sections of the working class will come into sharp conflict with the ruling parties.