

## Report from Germany by Rainer Apel

### SPD-Green policies turn away voters

*As the N.R.W. elections showed, voters want jobs, not "Third Way" austerity or radical environmentalist ideology.*

**F**or those Social Democrats who are still in touch with reality, the May 14 elections for state parliament in North Rhine-Westphalia (N.R.W.) were a wake-up call: the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and its coalition partner, the Green party, lost 3% of the vote each, or about 800,000 votes altogether. Four SPD cabinet ministers were voted out of the parliament, as was the chairman of the SPD parliamentary group.

N.R.W. is Germany's largest state, with 18 million inhabitants and 13 million voters, roughly 25% of the national electorate, which means that whatever happens in that state, will affect national politics.

As public interest in the party-funding scandals besetting the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU) has rapidly declined since the end of March, the SPD can no longer benefit from news headlines on the CDU's scandals. The SPD has not been able to regain those constituencies which it lost last year, because they were alienated by the Social Democrats' adoption of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's "Third Way" ideology. Voter turnout in N.R.W. was at 56.7% on May 14—the lowest in 50 years—and that means that traditional, labor-based voters stayed home. This is the writing on the wall for a party that seems committed to go for the hoax of the "new economy," which the party leaders believe will create the jobs of the future, and for which they are willing to sacrifice millions of jobs in the "old economy." About 1 million industrial jobs have already been sacrificed by SPD-led governments in N.R.W. over the last ten years, and

only 270,000 new jobs—many of them only part-time—have been created in the media and telecommunications sector. With 800,000 jobless, N.R.W. accounted for just under 25% of unemployment nationally, in April.

The more than 7% drop in voter turnout on May 14, as compared to the last elections in 1995, indicates that the SPD is going to share the fate of Tony Blair's "New Labour" and Al Gore's "New Democrats." In the past, voter turnout in state elections had always been 70-80% or more, and in national elections, 80% or more. Today, more than 40% of voters no longer feel attracted to any of the established political parties. The 42.8% which the SPD received in N.R.W. on May 14, means that if, as seems likely, the party also heads the new state government, it will have the backing of only 25% of the electorate.

As for the Greens, the SPD's coalition partner in N.R.W. since 1995, and in the national government since late 1998, they have lost votes in every election since September 1997, and have lost one-third or more in all elections since February 1999. In N.R.W., the Greens dropped from 10% to 7.1%. The Greens are being deserted by young voters, who had supported them in the past, and first-time voters are passing them up. A similar pattern is visible with the SPD. Among the yuppies who believe in the benefits of the "new economy," most vote for the CDU and the liberal Free Democratic Party. But many of these young Germans were forced to think twice, when they lost heavily in the stock market crashes of March and April. It is certain that they will not vote for the CDU

or FDP next time, and whether they will vote for the SPD or Greens, is uncertain.

Among the established political parties, unemployed youth have no party to vote for, because none of the parties is offering them a perspective for creating new jobs. The 15,000 jobs that the SPD-led government of N.R.W. created in the media and telecom sector last year, could not compensate for the loss of jobs in the traditional sectors of that state, which was once the industrial heartland of Germany. Companies that cut their workforces, are shrinking the scope of apprenticeships for young workers as well. In terms of the ratio of lost old jobs to new jobs created, N.R.W. ranks 10th among the 16 German states.

N.R.W. is not the "dynamic state" which the SPD advertises it to be. Outside of the "new economy," there is not one high-technology project in N.R.W.: The high-temperature nuclear reactor that was in use there, in a first experimental version at Hamm, was abandoned by the SPD-led government, as was the fast breeder reactor project, which was left uncompleted at Kalkar; the SPD in N.R.W. rejected any of the maglev train projects proposed for that state, which has the highest density of daily commuters in Germany, during the late 1980s and early 1990s; there is no aerospace-related site worth mentioning. And coal, steel, chemicals, and power generation, the traditional pillars on which the state's reputation as the "industrial powerhouse of Germany" once rested, are going to be abolished. In the coal-mining sector alone, 40,000 jobs will be eliminated in the next few years, with the full consent of the SPD. It seems that with almost every other industrial job that is eliminated, the Social Democrats lose another traditional voter.