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Far-right victory in Austrian presidential elections: A warning

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The electoral success on Sunday of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria is a warning for all of Europe. It shows that the rise of right-wing parties, nationalism, racism and war is inevitable if the fate of Europe is left in the hands of the established parties and the working class does not carry out its own independent political intervention.

The FPÖ candidate for president Norbert Hofer received 35 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections. The 45-year-old will compete in a run-off election on May 22 against 72-year-old economics professor Alexander Van der Bellen, the Green Party's candidate, who finished well behind in second place with 21 percent of the vote. Hofer has a good chance of victory. In that case, an ideologue of the far right would assume the presidency in Vienna for the first time in the 71-year history of the second Austrian republic. Hofer holds Islamophobic and xenophobic positions, sympathises with the German Pegida movement and opposes the European Union.

The Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), who have governed the country since 1945 on their own or in coalitions and form the present government, were decimated on Sunday. The two so-called people's parties won less than a quarter of the vote combined. Their candidates won 11 percent of the vote each. Both candidates secured less than a million votes together, while Hofer received 1.5 million alone.

The responsibility for the rise of the far right lies squarely with these two parties, as well as with the trade unions and pseudo-left groups operating in their milieu to cover their backs.

In 1999, then ÖVP Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel paved the way for the FPÖ's rise by bringing its leader at the time, Jörg Haider, into his government in spite of considerable international protest. Since then, the FPÖ itself went through a split, was shaken by a series of crisis, corruption scandals and affairs and has moved further to the right. Despite this, the party has been able to secure a series of electoral successes, culminating Sunday in its best ever election result at federal level.

The reason for this is firstly the social attacks carried out by the government in Vienna. Since parliamentary elections two-and-a-half years ago, the grand coalition led by SPÖ Chancellor Werner Faymann has pursued a strict austerity programme at the expense of the working class. It has increased the retirement age, cut public sector jobs and restricted wage increases. The number of unemployed has risen from 300,000 to 475,000 within five years. More than one in ten are now out of work.

The government has collaborated closely with the trade union bureaucracy, to which it is firmly aligned through a corrupt system of relations. Since no party opposes these cuts, the FPÖ has been able to channel the anger and frustration behind itself.

Although the FPÖ agitated against refugees, election analysts say it was not an anti-refugee vote. Much more decisive was the outrage at the SPÖ/ÖVP government, which according to a Sora poll has a disapproval rating of 68 percent.

“Only one in ten described the developments of recent years as positive, and frustration at politics in general was felt by 80 percent,” an article published by *Deutsche Welle* states. “In addition, fears are growing about job security after years of growing unemployment, many citizens fear an economic decline.”

The second reason is that the Social Democrats and the People's Party have paved the way for the FPÖ by adopting in large measure its xenophobic politics and making it the basis of government policy. They sealed the borders with Hungary and Italy, introduced upper limits for refugees, and did away with the right to asylum, in collaboration with right-wing governments in Hungary and the Balkans. In the Austrian state of Burgenland, the Social Democrats even formed a coalition government with the FPÖ.

Under these conditions, a Sora poll suggests that only 5 percent of workers voted for SPÖ candidate Rudolf Hundstorfer, who led the Austrian trade unions in 2007 and has headed the labour and social affairs ministry since 2008. Seventy-two percent expressed their anger by voting for the FPÖ candidate.

There is no shortage of those who are placing the blame for the strengthening of the FPÖ on the working class and calling for an “alliance of democrats” against the FPÖ – i.e. with the corrupt government parties, the Greens and the trade unions. The Communist Party calls for a vote for Van der Bellen, while the *Sozialistische Linkspartei*, the Austrian wing of the Committee for a

Workers' International (CWI), is inviting “the left wing of the SPÖ and the unions” to campaign against Hofer together.

In reality, this is the surest way to further accelerate the FPÖ's rise.

The rise of the far right can be halted only by an independent political movement of the working class, which wages an irreconcilable struggle against the austerity policies, xenophobia, the build-up of state repression and the militarist policies of the government and all bourgeois parties. Such a movement would cut the ground from under the feet of the right-wing demagogues and win to its side sections of the impoverished middle class currently voting for the FPÖ.

There are similar developments to those in Austria in a number of European countries. In France, the influence of the right-wing extremist Front National is growing due to the right-wing policies of President François Hollande and his Socialist Party government, which is supported by the trade unions and a variety of pseudo-left groups. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is profiting from the right-wing programmes pursued by the SPD and Left Party. And in Greece, the betrayal by Syriza has encouraged the rise of the fascist Golden Dawn.

These right-wing parties are ecstatic about the electoral success of the FPÖ. FN leader Marine Le Pen described it as “a strong impetus for the patriotic movements” in all countries. The Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders tweeted “fantastic.” And AfD executive committee member André Poggenburg stated, “With that, our political allies in Austria have set down a further important milestone.”

In Germany, the Left Party, itself responsible for social cuts in a number of states where it holds power, is calling for an anti-AfD alliance encompassing the trade unions, churches and SPD, as well as the Greens and the conservative CDU/CSU. Such an alliance would have the task of leading the opposition to the far right into a political blind alley.

Like all bourgeois parties, the Left Party fears a movement of the working class that threatens the foundations of capitalism much more than it fears the AfD. It would, if necessary, work together with the AfD, as the Austrian SPÖ is already doing with the FPÖ.

The anger and opposition of millions of people demands a new strategy. The struggle against the far right, social cuts and war requires the mobilisation of the international working class on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist programme. The same crisis of global capitalism that drives the ruling class ever further to the right also creates the conditions for the building of such a movement.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is devoting its international online rally on Sunday 1 May at 1 p.m. US Eastern Daylight Time to this goal. The centrepiece of this is the struggle against war. We call upon all WSWS readers to register today to participate in the International Online May Day Rally!