

A rude awakening in store after the German elections

All parties plan rigorous social cuts

Peter Schwarz
1 September 1998

The following editorial appears in the latest issue of Gleichheit, magazine of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), German section of the Fourth International, which is contesting the federal elections on September 27.

The nearer the date of the election approaches, the more the election campaign takes on the semblance of shadow boxing between advertising agencies. No theme is too banal, no event too insignificant for it to be exploited in their campaigns. Serious questions, on the other hand, the concerns that worry millions, are studiously ignored.

The lack of any serious political debate is so apparent it has even drawn extensive press comment. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper characterised the election as 'a game of hide-and-seek'. They write, 'It seems to be a long time since there were contemporaries who regarded election campaigns as phases of political enlightenment.' The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* complains, 'even the opposition is not willing (or not capable) of making the election into a debate regarding which is the better model for Germany's future.' And the news magazine *der Spiegel* comes to the conclusion that this election is 'the biggest-ever swindle in post-war German history.'

And the reason for this shadow-like election campaign? No party dares to say what it plans to do after the election. Behind the slick phrases about 'innovation', 'modernisation' and 'the future', seen on election posters everywhere, are hidden the most far-reaching attacks on the standards of living of broad social layers since the founding of the German Federal Republic. 'The experts agree across party lines,' writes *der Spiegel*, 'decades of comprehensive well-being was a happy circumstance of history, but by no means will it remain a lasting affair.'

The official number of unemployed stands at 4.1 million, but none of the big parties has said how they concretely intend to overcome this intolerable situation. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) unconditionally promises to grant

the problem 'the highest priority'. The government talks of a 'changing trend in the labour market' shortly before the election and does not recoil from utilising all manner of statistical sleights-of-hand to present the figures in a better light. Thus, since the beginning of the year they have more than doubled the number of job creation schemes, while cutting the duration of such schemes from twelve to six or even three months. Such a flash-in-the-pan fools almost nobody.

All politicians know that the high point of the wave of job cuts is still to come. The destruction of industrial jobs continues unabated. A forecast by business consultant Roland Berger predicts that a further 1.5 million jobs will go. This already follows jobs losses over the last decade of some 570,000 in engineering, 70,000 in steel and 36,000 in shipbuilding. In the building trades 200,000 jobs have been lost in the last two years alone. Administrative and service sector jobs are under even greater threat, where the consequences of computerisation coincide with rationalisation accompanying the European Monetary Union and the fallout from the economic crises in Asia and Russia. In banking, one in two workers will have to clear their desks over the next four years, amounting to half a million jobs lost.

It is no wonder, then, that not a single party is prepared to openly state what they are considering doing with the millions of unemployed. They would rather fill their campaigns with hollow and meaningless phrases culled from the world of advertising. They all agree that previous social safeguards have to be destroyed and the unemployed forced to work in jobs far below their qualifications. Parts of this can even be read in the small print of their programmes. The SPD wants to promote 'jobs in the low-wage service sector' with state subsidies paid to the employers, which will inevitably lead to generalised wage-dumping. The government has already adopted this policy and implemented it in a test scheme of so-called 'combination

wages'.

Things look the same in education, health and old-age care. Drastic cuts are to be expected everywhere, yet the parties all remain silent. If they were to tell the truth--runs their calculation--they would stand no chance of winning the election.

This election hide-and-seek conceals a more fundamental social process. The so-called 'people's parties' only represent a tiny fraction of the population. They all unquestioningly accept a social development that condemns ever broader layers to a life of poverty and insecurity, and unconditionally subordinate themselves to the interests of the 'economy', i.e., of the powerful industrial and financial concerns which dominate economic life--concerns that, like the new Daimler-Chrysler corporation, often posses greater financial resources than a medium-sized country.

Although representative democracy has always tended to produce a political caste that enjoys a higher personal standard of living, what is presently taking place goes far beyond the usual measure of corruption and 'jobs for the boys'. If, in the past, the Social Democrats of the SPD and Christian Democrats of the CDU were able to guarantee their traditional voters a halfway secure existence and reasonable income, today they are leaving them in droves.

A high school or university diploma, successful apprenticeship or years of experience in the factory are no longer any guarantee for a secure future. What counts now is inherited wealth, the right investments on the stock markets, or often simply being in the right place at the right time. Increasingly, the old, youth, workers and those traditionally regarded as middle class must fight for their existence, whilst a small but influential elite wallow in indescribable luxury.

It is this elite--to which most politicians and the opinion-makers in the media belong--that the Bonn parties are wooing. This is the 'new centre' which Gerhard Schröder, SPD candidate for chancellor, so often invokes. For quite some time the Free Democrats have not been the only party of the 'better off'. The Christian Democrats have never made a secret of their own tendencies in this direction. By naming the young millionaire entrepreneur Jost Stollman as future Minister of Economics, the SPD has merely given a clear signal. Joschka Fischer, leader of the Greens, uses every opportunity to swear his loyalty to private property.

And the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS--Party of Democratic Socialism, the former Stalinist party of state in East Germany), despite its socialist rhetoric, is no exception. Its chosen clientele are the petty proprietors and would-be entrepreneurs of East Germany who feel they have been unfairly treated by the West. Wherever the PDS is found in local government, its political practices can hardly

be distinguished from those of the CDU and SPD.

The present chimera of an election campaign thus reveals a distorted expression of the deep gulf opening up between the mass of the population and the traditional parties. The big danger is that this vacuum will be filled by right-wing demagogues. This can only be opposed through the construction of a socialist alternative that gives expression to the fundamental needs of the working class. This is the significance of the participation of the PSG in the elections.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) does not count on any spectacular success in the short-term. The decades-long domination of the workers movement by Stalinism and social democracy has undermined once widespread socialist convictions. The resulting general political confusion cannot be overcome through a few clever election slogans. However, the election offers an opportunity to develop a more far-reaching discussion of social alternatives and so to raise the socialist consciousness of the working class again. The inevitable confrontation between the future government--whether SPD, CDU or both together--will raise the interest in such a discussion. The international socialist perspectives of the PSG will increasingly find an audience.

See the election web site of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)

[In German]

See Also:

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) Election Programme 1998:

For an independent political movement of the working class
[28 August 1998]

Intensive campaigning begins in German national election
[27 August 1998]



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact