

Socialist Equality Party begins election campaign in Germany

3 September 1998

The mainstream parties in Germany continue to restrict their campaigns to the most banal and empty slogans. In Tuesday's *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, an editorial comments on the launch of the Greens' bid to be part of a future government. 'If in the past the Greens paid an excessive attention to details, they have become, in the meantime, rather too brief. Just two pages suffice for the Greens' 'programme of immediate measures' ... Everything is just presented in outline, no one wants to be too precise.'

Like Banquo's ghost, the question haunting this election is the catastrophic level of unemployment, and the burgeoning costs of the welfare state.

Out of a working-age population of over 38 million, over 4 million are officially unemployed (a more realistic figure is 7 million) and this is set to rise. Still considerable state spending on social provisions and welfare consumed over DM1,250 billion in 1997 (\$706 billion at present rates). Every third mark in Germany is presently spent by the public purse. Despite the cuts during Chancellor Kohl's premiership, a comprehensive system of publicly financed benefits and other arrangements provide for pensions (DM384.7 billion), illness (DM244.5 billion) and unemployment (DM142.6 billion), to name just the largest areas of expenditure.

No establishment party wants to say what it really intends to do about this after the elections for fear of scaring off the voters. The German and transnational corporations complain about the 'high wages and associated labour costs' here. A German industrial production worker costs \$28 an hour, against \$18 for the American counterpart. The implication is clear to see. If Germany is to remain competitive on the global markets, runs their argument, then the overall costs of labour in Germany must be brought down to the level of the international competition. This means drastic wage reductions and even more critical cuts in the fabric of the welfare state.

Millions of German voters thus face an uncertain future with nothing to chose between all the parties presently in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) in Bonn.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG) is standing candidates in six of Germany's 16 Länder, or states, meaning some 60 percent of all voters can cast their ballot for the party. With four weeks until polling day, the PSG has launched a series of public meetings to present the party and its socialist alternative. Under German electoral law, the party will also be able to broadcast several short election messages on both national and local television and radio channels.

Even before the meetings or broadcasts began, the party had received over 115 enquiries. Many are e-mails, in response to the PSG election web site (gleichheit.de). Two television and six radio stations requested interviews with party candidates. A number of libraries and institutes have asked for further election material. Many teachers and students, covering the election as part of their studies, have also requested information about the PSG. The most frequently asked questions concern the high level of unemployment, and education is another common topic. The party's official ballot designation is 'Socialist Equality Party--German section of the Fourth International', eliciting several letters and e-mails asking for

more information about the Fourth International and its aims.

Public meeting in Duisburg

Here in North Rhine Westfalia, the most populous and heavily industrialised state of Germany, 13 million voters can chose between 25 parties seeking representation in the *Bundestag*.

Last Saturday, the PSG held its first election meeting in the Ruhr. In Duisburg, Ulrich Rippert, PSG chairman and a candidate in Berlin, addressed a lively meeting which was also filmed by the *Phoenix* TV channel as part of a documentary programme on the elections. It was a predominantly youthful audience with several first-time voters in attendance. There were high school and university students, young steel workers from Thyssen, public sector employees and others. Several of those who came had travelled from other towns and cities to listen to what the PSG had to say. The audience also had an international character, with Tamil supporters of the PSG, living in exile in Germany, also participating in the meeting and discussion.

In his address, Rippert placed the election within the rapidly unfolding crisis which has engulfed Russia. 'In just 12 days, the rouble lost half of its value, the Russian currency market has gone into free-fall. With the temporary halting of foreign debt payments, the government has to all intents announced the country's bankruptcy. But it is not just a Russian crisis whose consequences are, of course, terrible for the Russian people. It is an international crisis which has gripped the Russian economy.'

Rippert reminded the audience that less than 10 years ago, when the Berlin Wall fell, and then when the Soviet Union collapsed, the champagne corks had popped. The world's press had been full of triumphant headlines. In the 'battle of the systems, capitalism had proved itself superior. Some even spoke of the 'end of history', meaning that with the triumph of capitalism mankind had now achieved all that was possible: freedom and democracy.'

'The collapses of East Germany and the Soviet Union,' Rippert explained, 'were brought about by changes in the world economy; by the process of globalisation, which means that the domination of transnational corporations and the internationalisation of production comes into conflict with the system of national states. Our movement alone analysed the collapse of East Germany and the Soviet Union as the beginning of a much greater breakdown of the entire capitalist system.'

Rippert referred to the concerns which are now being voiced in the press, that the present collapse of capitalism in Russia will have a profound effect on the thinking of millions of Russians. 'Just a few days ago, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper wrote, 'the greatest danger consists in the fact that the Russian people may draw the conclusion from the most recent events that the market economy has failed.' Quite so! But their big problem is that the market economy *has* really failed.'

The implications for Germany are enormous. The well-being of post-war Germany was recently described by *der Spiegel* magazine as a 'happy circumstance of history, but by no means will it remain a lasting affair,'

Rippert pointed out. 'Capitalism is now showing its true face again. Regardless which government comes to power in Germany after the elections, it will be a government of extremely harsh attacks on broad layers of the population.'

'There are further lessons which can be drawn from Russia,' Rippert continued. 'How do you explain that a small group of six or seven men can decide the fate of an entire people numbering hundreds of millions? What sort of democracy is that? The reason why a handful of millionaires and corrupt politicians can do what they like is the political absence of the working class. This is the most critical problem in every country.'

Rippert went on to explain that this is the central question which the PSG is seeking to address in the elections. 'All of the demands we raise are concentrated on one point: enabling the working class to act as an independent social force. Only such independent and politically conscious action by broad social layers can give a progressive answer to the social crisis.'

Following Rippert's address, Richard Tyler from the Socialist Equality Party in Britain spoke. He noted that the PSG manifesto contains the question, 'What can be expected from an SPD government?' Tyler said the experiences of the first 15 months of the New Labour government in Britain gives some indication what faces Germany.

'The first budget of Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown in July 1997 adopted the previous Tory government's harsh spending targets and initiated a range of work-fare schemes aimed mainly at workers under 25 years of age. Brown boasted that the new budget, 'begins the task of modernising not just taxation but the entire benefits system of our country.' The net result of New Labour's policies has been to promote even greater inequality. The annual Sunday Times 'Rich List' notes that the total wealth of the top 1,000 individuals and families in Britain is more than £108 billion, a rise of £10 billion since last year. Amongst those who have seen their fortunes increase most dramatically are some of Labour's staunchest new supporters. These include multi-millionaire *Formula 1* boss Bernie Ecclestone, and Lord Sainsbury, the billionaire supermarket magnate who was number one on the list.'

Tyler outlined how, in areas such as health and education, the Labour government was presiding over worsening conditions for masses of working people coinciding with the growth of control in such areas of social policy by big business pursuing the most narrow profit interests.

Public meeting in Berlin

Home to 3.5 million, Berlin is once again the capital city. Bonn, the quiet town on the Rhine, had served this purpose following the collapse of Nazi rule in 1945 and the division of Germany into East and West. Now the parliament will soon be meeting in the old *Reichstag* building in Berlin, scene of Karl Liebknecht's opposition to the SPD vote for the Kaiser's war credits in 1914, and Hitler's crushing of all democratic rights in 1933.

The meeting in Berlin was addressed by Susanne Huber and Endrik Bastian, PSG candidates in Berlin and Saxony-Anhalt. A lively discussion then developed. Several asked how the PSG evaluated the present crisis in Russia and how workers there might use it in their own interests. Susanne Huber explained, 'There is no short and easy way for workers in Russia, just as here. They have to draw out the lessons of history, in particular to understand that what existed there was Stalinism and not 'real existing socialism' but its greatest enemy.'

Another questioner asked whether the PSG was prepared to work together with the unions. Endrik Bastian said, 'The PSG fights for the independence of the working class from the politics of the unions, which are characterised by nationalism and the active defence of the employers.' He pointed out that a recent survey had revealed that support for right-wing radical parties was far higher amongst trade union members than

those not organised by the unions, especially amongst younger people. 'However, this does not mean the PSG turns its back on workers in the unions. But the party refuses to support the illusion that they can defend their interests today by means of the unions.'

An unemployed participant wanted to know how the PSG aimed to enable workers to organise themselves. 'Do you want to do it like the SPD did last century with Workers Education Clubs?' In the discussion that followed, PSG members explained that the crucial factor in developing an independent movement of the working class was the revival of socialist traditions and ideas. 'What we mean is not spouting radical slogans but the creation of a scientific view of society among broad layers of workers and youth. In this way, enabling them to understand a complex social reality and see beyond the spontaneous anger occasioned by this or that injustice, to a programme which offers a way out of their present misery. We do indeed link up with the work the SPD carried out in the last century when it was still a genuine socialist party, but we use the modern methods of today. The functions of the Workers Education Clubs can best be fulfilled by the *World Socialist Web Site*, enabling workers all over the world to discuss political questions.'

Another PSG speaker pointed out, 'Without the work of political education carried out by the early SPD, on which the Bolsheviks also built, the October Revolution in 1917 would not have been possible. It was this high level of socialist culture amongst broad sections of workers that Stalinism destroyed. A whole generation of politically educated workers and intellectuals were wiped out. The Stalinists suppressed every independent idea, and this is largely responsible for the confusion which exists today.'

See Also:

First Socialist Equality Party election broadcasts

[3 September 1998]

Growing child poverty in Germany

[3 September 1998]

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

For an independent political movement of the working class

[28 August 1998]



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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