

The end of the "Ice Age" in Germany

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The May/June issue of Gleichheit (Equality), the German-language magazine published by the PSG (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is out this week, featuring the most important articles that have recently appeared on the World Socialist Web Site. Below is the editorial of the new issue.

The scope and pace of periods of traumatic social change are often recognized only in historical retrospect by those who experience them. Frequently, the strains and deformations such periods bring with them initially express themselves in the form of personal problems and crises. This deflects people's attention to within, to the individual, hiding from view the larger social context—until this context makes itself felt again in convulsions that wrack society.

There is no doubt that Germany and Europe as a whole are currently experiencing such a period of profound social change. For the moment, this is primarily taking place in the economy. The consequences of globalisation, which up to now only gradually permeated the structure of European society, are now making inroads at a furious pace.

The impact of the Internet and modern communications technology and the growing dominance of the stock market have brought about dramatic changes in economic structures and working conditions. Together with the withdrawal of the state from all forms of social responsibility, this is having a profound effect on the lives of millions of people.

The 16-year rule of the conservative Kohl government, which many people saw as a period of aggressive politics in the interests of big business, now looks in retrospect like a good-natured idyll. Conservative journalist Josef Joffe describes the Kohl era in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* as an "ice age" that blocked every form of change.

Joffe writes: "Future historians may criticise the former federal chancellor not so much for his role in the fund-raising scandal, but rather for freezing out change in every sector of German society during the 16 years [he was in office]." But now, rejoices Joffe, "cracks in the ice" are finally appearing: "It is as if a thick layer of ice is breaking up, and the ice floes are beginning to drift apart, against each other, on top of each other."

So far, these changes have hardly made themselves felt in the relative strength of the political parties. Parliamentary interplay continues as ever, with one or the other of the parties temporarily gaining the upper hand. However, this is a process in which the public is less and less interested. Political life in Berlin has long since ceased to have anything to do with the issues and problems that concern the majority of the population.

Instead, the traditional parties have entered into a competition with each other to see which of them is most subservient to the demands of big business. The accusation of being "hostile to business" is the worst insult politicians can imagine these days—regardless of whether they are Social Democrats, Greens, Conservatives, Liberals or members of the post-Stalinist PDS. The next worse insult is to be called "old fashioned"—an epithet directed against anyone who defends past social reforms.

The most drastic transformation has been undergone by the Greens. They were the only party over the past 20 years to enter parliament without wealthy financial backers or a powerful party apparatus. Their demands for environmental protection, pacifism, social equilibrium and justice for the Third World gained support in sections of the population.

Nothing of this has remained since they entered the present coalition government. Instead of immediately closing down nuclear power plants, they have signed a 30-year continued-existence guarantee for the nuclear power industry. Instead of pacifism, they sanctioned the first military intervention of the German army in post-World War II history. Instead of social equilibrium, a Green minister is dismantling the public health system. Instead of support for the Third World, they have voted for massive cuts in development aid. This list of Green "omissions" can be continued indefinitely.

The reversal of all values is taking on grotesque forms in the SPD (Social Democrats) as well. After last year's election debacle made it clear that the SPD's voter base is not prepared to do without social justice, this term has been reinterpreted in a truly Orwellian fashion.

If one follows the logic of SPD executive committee member Wolfgang Clement, the implementation of social justice requires one thing above all others: more social inequality. During a recent discussion of the party's program, Clement, who is the minister president of Germany's most populous state, North Rhine Westphalia, thundered against the "declamatory equation of justice with equality", proclaiming that "the old belief that everything that reduces inequality in the distribution of income and wealth is socially just" is no longer of any use.

The present crisis of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) flows from the same source. The reason why the recent fund-raising scandal shattered this party to its very foundations is that its foundations have been undermined for years. Kohl's policy of consensus and horse-trading, by which he attempted to reconcile the different interests of his middle-class voter base, was no longer compatible with the interests of global markets.

Now the CDU is being torn apart by the conflict between those politicians who are trying to lure away disappointed SPD voters with nationalistic and right-wing populist slogans, and those who want to beat SPD leader and German Chancellor Schröder at his own game in appealing to the so-called "new middle layer of society" by completely adapting themselves to the requirements of big business. The recent election of Angela Merkel as the new CDU chairperson only masked this conflict, but did not solve it. Inevitably, it will come to a head again.

For the moment, the alienation of all political parties from the mass of the population continues to conceal the tensions in the substructure of society, where people find no means of political articulation. On the surface all is calm. But this is a deceptive calm.

Society can only bear a certain amount of social inequality. The consequences of mass unemployment and the growth of poverty and hardship at one end of society and obscene levels of wealth at the other end are creating mounting pressures for a political way out of the situation. The longer this is obstructed, the more explosive will be the forms it takes.

Right-wing demagogues have been attempting to channel the anxieties caused by globalisation to the dead-end road of xenophobia and chauvinism for some time now. In Austria, Jörg Haider succeeded with this formula.

The trade unions are also recommending a backward-looking orientation to the nation state as a response to globalization. In Europe, they are (for the time being) keeping their distance from right-wing politicians; in the US some trade union leaders have already made public appearances with representatives of the extreme right. Patrick Buchanan, one such figure, was a speaker at a Teamsters demonstration against the IMF in Washington on April 12. Buchanan's message, which is shared by the trade union bureaucracy, was: No trade agreements with China!

Regardless of who puts forward demands for new trade restrictions and a strengthening of the nation state, and how he or she justifies it, this demand has its own logic and it is profoundly reactionary one. Globalisation is based on an extremely progressive development, the growth of human productive power. This is the prerequisite for eliminating poverty and misery, satisfying basic social needs, and raising the cultural level of humanity.

While in the nineteenth century the nation state formed the framework for the development of the productive forces, these forces grew far beyond the bounds of the nation state in the twentieth century. Modern technology requires an international division of labour and is incompatible with national barriers and restrictions. Any attempt to force the world economy back into the corset of the nation state will inevitably end in a catastrophe. The result of such attempts 70 years ago was fascism. Trotsky's astute comment at that time was: "Attempts to save economic life by inoculating it with a virus from the corpse of nationalism result in blood poisoning that bears the name of fascism."

Conversely, globalisation has catastrophic effects as long as it is used entirely for the purpose of profit maximisation at the beck and call of the international financial markets and powerful transnational corporations. Wages and welfare benefits are

spiralling downwards, entire continents are being destroyed and stripped bare, while the constant struggle for domination of the world market results in international conflicts and wars.

To find a way out of this dead end requires a new political perspective. The modern productive forces must be liberated from the stranglehold of capital and placed in the service of all of humanity. As we wrote in an earlier issue of *Gleichheit*, the big question is: "Who controls the global economy, and whose interests determine the way its enormous technological and cultural possibilities are put to use?" The outcome of the approaching political explosions will depend decisively on the degree to which this new perspective gains influence.

The prerequisite for putting this perspective into practice is the unity and independent political organisation of the international working class. The global integration of the economy has swelled the ranks of the working class. In backward countries which hitherto were hardly industrialised, millions of people now work in factories and offices. In the advanced countries, the forms of work have changed, but the number of people who have to make a living under precarious conditions has increased.

The Fourth International long ago came to the conclusion that drawing the political lessons of the twentieth century is an important element in the political rearmament of the working class. Without an understanding of the role of Stalinism and Social Democracy, the labour movement will not be able to turn once again to a socialist perspective. What both of these bureaucracies had in common was their abandonment of the original, international perspective of the Marxist movement in favour of a national orientation.

In this issue of *Gleichheit*, which again contains the most important articles published by the *World Socialist Web Site* over the past two months, we approach this task from a new angle. In a detailed article, Alex Steiner writes about Martin Heidegger and poses the question of the interrelationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his role as a member of Hitler's Nazi Party.

This question is by no means merely of historical interest. Heidegger is considered by many to have been one of the greatest philosophers of the century, and he exercised enormous influence on the theoreticians of postmodernism. Alex Steiner's article provides insights into the ideological tendencies of the twentieth century, and thus a more profound understanding of the political problems of that century.



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