

Election statement of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany

Build an independent political movement of the working class

21 September 2002

The *Bundestag* (parliamentary) elections on September 22 take place under dramatic conditions. In the Middle East, the danger of war intensifies. A military strike by the US against Iraq threatens to set the entire region ablaze, with unpredictable results for the rest of the world. Unemployment, poverty and education cutbacks have reached alarming heights and the crisis on the financial markets could trigger a worldwide recession at any time. Fundamental democratic rights are under continuous attack. Environmental disasters are mounting. But none of the political parties contesting the German elections has a response to these problems.

The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) were driven out of office four years ago due to the disastrous social consequences of their period in government. After 16 years of CDU/CSU/FDP rule, the pent-up discontent over welfare cuts, mass unemployment and sinking living standards helped the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) regain the chancellorship, for the first time in alliance with the Green Party. The result, however, was not a return to the reformist politics of the Willy Brandt era, but rather a continuation of the policies of their conservative predecessors—only at a more rapid tempo.

There is hardly any difference between the programmes of all the parties represented in the *Bundestag*. Their election promises are like peas in a pod. All of them are in competition over who can best represent the interests of big business, cuddle up to the *Mittelstand* (medium-sized businesses), introduce low-wage jobs and reduce employees' rights. They strive to outdo one another with proposals to keep immigrants away and increase the powers of the state apparatus. Terms such as democracy and citizens' rights have largely disappeared from the political vocabulary.

Never before has the entire political elite been so removed from the daily concerns of the population. Not a single party offers a serious response to the problems that occupy millions of ordinary people—economic insecurity, unemployment, the destruction of education. In the course of the election campaign, hollow slogans and phoney disputes between the leading candidates have replaced any genuine debate.

The future political landscape cannot be left in the hands of these parties. They are leading society to disaster. Everything now depends on the building of a new party that will enable working people to intervene independently in political events. This is the aim of the Socialist Equality Party.

In the past few weeks the war being prepared by the US against Iraq has become the central campaign issue. SPD leader Gerhard Schröder's statement that under his leadership Germany would not take part in such a war, either with or without a UN mandate, has bolstered the poll ratings of

the SPD and the Greens. Whereas the CDU/CSU and FDP had previously been ahead, an election victory for the incumbent SPD-Green coalition now seems probable.

Broad sections of the population reject the impending war against Iraq. Schröder and his Green Party foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, are seeking to accommodate such views. Nevertheless, it would be fatal to rely on them on this issue. They are pursuing completely different aims from those of the majority of the population who deeply distrust the official reasons given for the war and vehemently reject a military strike that could claim hundreds of thousands of innocent victims.

The distinct position of the German government becomes clear when one examines their attitude to the Iraq war within the context of their record of foreign and security policy. Their policy is aimed at re-establishing Germany as a great power that can compete with the other great powers, in particular the US, not only economically, but also politically, and, above all, militarily. Prominent military figures regard this as self-evident.

In his inaugural speech as inspector general, Harald Kujat, appointed by the then-Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD), summed up this standpoint in November 2000 as follows: "If Germany is to play the role in Europe and beyond corresponding to its position, its interests and the weight of an 80-million-strong population in the centre of Europe, then its armed forces must enjoy a corresponding size, scope, equipment and capacity."

A political balance sheet shows that, in four years, the SPD-Green coalition has done more to transform the German military into a functioning instrument of foreign policy than in the sixteen years of rule of its conservative predecessors. It has participated in two wars—1999 in Yugoslavia and 2001 in Afghanistan—and dispatched German soldiers to 16 different countries and regions—from the Balkans and Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa. It has increased expenditure for international military operations tenfold and launched an enormous armaments programme, with estimated expenditure for the period 2001 to 2015 amounting to 110 billion euros.

This military build-up required the SPD and the former pacifists in the Greens to overcome the deep-rooted abhorrence to militarism in the German population. Under a conservative government, similar measures would have led to mass protests.

German foreign policy rejects one-sided American action against Iraq because it follows its own imperialist aims in the Persian Gulf. This rejection did not prevent the government from supporting sanctions against Iraq that have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children, or of despatching several thousand German military personnel to the Middle East in the context of the "war against terrorism".

If it should actually come to war against Iraq, the attitude of Schröder and Fischer could quickly change. In a speech to the UN assembly, Fischer spoke in favour of a new ultimatum to Iraq that, according to the US interpretation, is merely to provide a pretext for military intervention. The only effective means that the German government has to prevent a war—the closure of US bases in Germany—has so far been carefully excluded by Schröder and Fischer.

Opposition to America's war plans cannot rely on German imperialism. In order to halt the warmongers in Washington and Berlin, a broad, international movement must be constructed against militarism and war, under the leadership of the working class and directed against the entire ruling elite, including the SPD-Green government.

The self-assurance with which Schröder and Fischer now proceed to step out of America's shadow and herald German interests has deeply reactionary implications. Schröder's retort about a "German way" not only intensifies the conflicts with the US, but also fuels tensions within Europe. Many in other European countries have not forgotten that in the last century, two world wars were launched from German soil, reducing the whole continent to ruins.

Once more, it becomes clear that the harmonious unification of Europe cannot take place from above—through the governments, corporations and banks that set the tone for the Brussels bureaucracy. Increasingly, the European Union (EU) appears to ordinary people in the west and east of the continent as a despotic power dictating how they should live, not subject to any form of democratic control and following the instructions of the European great powers—in particular, Germany. This not only intensifies tensions between the European governments, but also lends force to the right-wing nationalist elements that strive for the balkanization of the continent—Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party, the Northern League in Italy, the Flemish Bloc in Belgium and several fascist movements in Eastern Europe.

The unification of Europe can take place only from below, through a movement of working people that places social needs at its centre, instead of the profit interests of the corporations, and which categorically rejects the imperialist aims of the European great powers. This is possible only in the form of the United Socialist States of Europe.

There is an inseparable link between foreign and domestic policy. The fact that Schröder's rejection of an Iraqi war has nothing to do with a genuine policy of peace becomes clear when placed within the context of his virtual declaration of war on his own population. Under the SPD-Green coalition, the state has armed itself with unparalleled powers, while sharply reducing social expenditures.

Four years ago, the Socialist Equality Party warned, "[N]o change of course can be expected from an SPD-led government. If the SPD returns to office after 16 years, it is not as a party of social reform, but as a party of social confrontation. Only one thing distinguishes the SPD from the Christian Democratic-Liberal coalition, itself paralysed by internal strife: it will carry out the attacks against working people more energetically, more consistently and more cannily" [1998 Bundestag election manifesto of the PSG].

This warning has been confirmed in its entirety. In its four years in power, the SPD-Green coalition has lurched to the right in all respects, both socially and politically.

The two series of security laws whisked through parliament at express speed by the SPD-Green government after the September 11 attacks dispense with a whole range of fundamental democratic rights and established legal principles. They unambiguously set the compass toward a totalitarian state.

The post-war separation of the police from the intelligence services, based on the tragic experiences of Hitler's Gestapo and the Stalinist Stasi (East German state security service), has been removed, and the division of power between the police and judiciary has been weakened. Mass

computer searches, which turn thousands of blameless citizens into potential suspects, have been expanded, while the shielding of information from the state has been eliminated. According to the new rules governing security screening, a mere suspicion, or even an outdated notation by the intelligence forces, is sufficient to impose a lifelong ban on employment, denying the affected person and his lawyer from even knowing what the victim is accused of. Hundred of thousands of people employed in supply and transport enterprises are potentially affected.

It would be naïve to regard these measures—which had been planned long before their implementation—as merely a reaction to the events of September 11. The hysteria surrounding security issues and the rearmament of the state are rather a preparation for future class conflicts that are inevitable under conditions of mounting social contradictions. Growing social inequality is incompatible with democracy.

In the sphere of immigration policy the SPD-Green government has also lurched to the right. The new German immigration law means a further tightening of the existing limitations on foreign workers and their families. Some relief is to be made available only to those few immigrants who are judged to be "useful" for the economy. For all others, the requirements for immigration and naturalization have been made more difficult. Rather than facilitating a more humane treatment of foreigners, the law increases the hardships that already exist.

Foreigners are particularly hard hit by the new security laws. They are no longer protected by even the most elementary legal protections. Photos, finger prints and even speech prints may be stored for many years. The smallest pretext is sufficient for deportation. Inhumane deportation practices, which cost dozens of lives annually in Germany and Europe, have been expanded under the SPD and Greens.

Regarding the undeveloped countries, i.e., the countries of origin of many immigrants, German development aid under the government department led by SPD "left-winger" Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul increased over four years by just 0.01 percent of the gross national product—from 0.26 to 0.27 percent. It now amounts to five billion euros annually. In absolute terms, that is less money worldwide than the amount allotted for the short term to compensate for recent flood damage in Saxony and Bavaria. The far-too-modest amount recommended by the United Nations amounts to 0.7 percent of GNP.

When the SPD and Greens won the election in 1998, social inequality had been rising continually for the previous 25 years. Between 1973 and 1998 national income increased approximately four-fold, real wages and salaries, on the other hand, rose by just 7 percent. Those profiting from the rise were almost exclusively those holding capital or independent incomes.

In 1998 the richest 10 percent of all German households possessed 42 percent of all wealth, while the lower half of households accounted for only 4.5 percent. Every tenth household was considered to be living in poverty, with 2.9 million people dependent on social welfare assistance.

This redistribution of wealth and incomes from the poor to the rich was continued by means of the tax and social policies of the SPD-Green coalition.

The tax reform introduced in 2000 lowered the highest tax rate from 53 to 42 percent, enabling those with an income of a million to save 100,000 euros annually. The entry-level tax rate was also lowered, but the savings for households with small or average incomes are substantially smaller, and are countered by increases in numerous indirect taxes, such as the environment tax and tobacco and insurance taxes. In defiance of their election promise, the SPD and Greens refused to re-implement the wealth tax that was abolished by the Kohl government.

Large concerns were virtually freed from paying taxes on profits by the new laws on tax write-offs. Receipts from corporate taxes sank from 23.6 billion euros in the year 2000 to minus 400 million euros in the year 2001—the treasury was forced to refund money to companies. Income from

trade taxes also dropped, in some cities by more than 50 percent.

The consequences are particularly felt by the municipalities and states, which are already short of money and are forced to counter the loss of funding with further harsh cuts in staff, schools, kindergartens, homes for the elderly and leisure facilities. In this way, the billions in tax giveaways to the large banks and companies are lavished at the expense of families, children and old persons who are dependent on public services.

The health reform package introduced by the SPD and Greens was oriented exclusively to giving relief to business enterprises. Employers' labour costs were lowered by reducing health insurance contributions. In order to avoid any conflict with the powerful lobby of chemical companies, the change took the form of a further reduction in services. People in lower income brackets are hit hardest because they can no longer afford to pay for many services.

For the first time, with the so-called "Riester pension" (named after the SPD labour minister) the SPD-Green coalition finally shattered the principle of pension financing based on equal contributions by employee and employer. With a drastic reduction in the payments accruing from the official pension scheme, employees are now forced to take up additional private insurance, financed by the individual without the participation of the employers.

At the end of his legislative period the number of unemployed, which chancellor Schröder called the yardstick of his success, is over four million, i.e., as high as it was at the start. If one examines the employment situation more carefully, it becomes clear that the situation is even worse. In particular, unemployment among young people has risen greatly. Over a half million unemployed persons are younger than 25. At the same time, many full-time jobs have been replaced by cheap labour positions. The social position of the unemployed has worsened due to the constant reduction in unemployment benefits.

All parties are now seeking to address this deplorable situation by promoting low-wage work. Based on suggestions made by the Hartz commission, the SPD wants to use the unemployment exchanges to lend out 780,000 jobless workers to enterprises at cheap rates. The CSU/CDU candidate, Stoiber, advances an almost identical plan. He proposes to invest 3 billion euros to create between 600,000 and 800,000 low-wage jobs.

Instead of combating unemployment, such measures merely serve to undermine existing employer-employee relationships. What enterprise will be interested in continuing to employ workers on a long-term basis if it can rent them more cheaply at short notice, on the basis of subsidized wages?

In studying the election programmes and promises of the major parties, it is virtually impossible to detect differences of any note.

Even on the issue of war, the differences are narrower than one might at first think. The CSU/CDU and FDP also speak out in opposition to German participation in a war against Iraq. They accuse Schröder, however, of openly attacking the US government.

There is broad agreement between all the parties about the path to be taken with regard to immigration, economic and social policy, and domestic policy as a whole. The differences crop up over the speed of implementation and certain details.

Over the past few years the parties have moved closer together, even as they have moved to the right. This is apparent in the form of the election campaign, in which the personalities of the main candidates are increasingly prioritised at the expense of political content.

The SPD, which had its roots in the Marxist workers movement and until the 1970s had many working class members, has largely broken with this social background. The party's active members and functionaries come—in common with the other parties—largely from the state apparatus itself, academic circles or the professional middle class. The SPD differentiates itself from the Union parties (the CSU and CDU) only by its

close connections with the trade union bureaucracy.

The trade unions, however, have long ceased representing the interests of their members and have transformed themselves into a virtual factory police apparatus for the suppression of social conflict. This has been above all apparent in their backing of the Hartz commission, which is the source of many of the demands made in the social democratic election programme.

Based on the closest collaboration between government, trade union and business representatives, this commission has thrown to the winds all of the gains made by the trade union movement over the last five decades with its call for the massive state sponsorship of low-wage jobs. With a stroke, the commission has swept aside the right of workers to choose their jobs and the right to negotiate wages.

In the course of their four years in power, the Green Party has undergone a far-reaching transformation. There is not a trace left of the ideals it once propagated: pacifism, civil rights and protection of the environment. The party has assented to military interventions by the German army, security measures introduced by Home Affairs Minister Otto Schily, and a plan—ostensibly for the ending of nuclear power—that, in fact, provides the nuclear power industry with a 35-year guarantee of further operation. The party that sang the praises of so-called democracy from the ranks and instigated women's quotas and a rotations principle for political posts, now propagates its own personality cult. Green Party election posters baldly feature the name "Joschka".

Such a transformation comes as no surprise to anyone who has refrained from simply believing what Green Party leaders say and examined instead the roots of this party. Founded at the end of the 1970s by the remnants of the student protest movement, the Greens strictly rejected a class analysis of society and sought instead to cure social ills on the basis of moral principles. This corresponded to the social status of the party's membership, which had struck firm roots in society and feared any social disturbance. Against the background of growing social polarization, such a standpoint can no longer be maintained. The Greens have subsequently made their decision—for the defence of the existing order against any popular opposition.

With the nomination of the chairman of the CSU, Edmund Stoiber, as chancellor candidate the Union parties have also undertaken a decisive further step to the right. The CSU has consistently worked inside the Union for the integration of nationalist and right-wing populist forces. Stoiber himself supported the entry of Jörg Haider's Freedom Party into the Austrian government, and enjoys close relations with the Berlusconi government in Rome.

In the course of the election campaign Stoiber chose to present a more moderate image, and left the job of appealing to far-right elements to his proposed interior minister, Günter Beckstein. That this was merely a tactical manoeuvre, however, was made clear by the decision of the Union to elevate the issue of immigration in the last week of campaigning.

With the election of Guido Westerwelle as chairman, the Free Democratic Party has turned to that layer of society which was able to enormously enrich itself in the course of the recent boom on the stock markets. The FDP's combination of "fun party" and extreme "free market" economic liberalism appeals to egoistic sentiments that reject any form of social responsibility. Westerwelle's deputy Jürgen Möllemann has attempted to combine this with a dose of right-wing populism. Möllemann's campaign for 18 percent of the vote is modelled after the successful election campaigns of Austria's Jörg Haider and the Netherlands' Pim Fortuyn.

Finally there is the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), which presents itself as a "left-wing force". On the basis of any objective criteria, this claim does not hold water. The PDS is the successor party to the SED (Socialist Unity Party), the ruling party of the former East German state. This Stalinist apparatus regarded "socialism" as its own

control over state property. In practice, it concentrated on the political suppression of the working class. Following the collapse of the East German state (the German Democratic Republic), the PDS, which arose from the ashes of the SED, embraced private property while maintaining its hostility to the working class.

The PDS always springs into the breach when the CDU and SPD are discredited and the danger emerges that they could lose political control. As soon as the PDS assumes positions of responsibility, its claims to socialism vanish without a trace. This is most clearly evident in Berlin, where the party, together with the SPD, is in the process of implementing a programme of draconian cuts. The former CDU-SPD administration of Berlin was forced to resign following a bank scandal and growing public opposition.

The shift to the right by all these parties makes clear that the existing political framework is incapable of providing any answers to the problems confronting millions of people. In a formal respect, the current election corresponds to democratic norms, but when one understands democracy to be the right of the people to decide their own future, then this description can hardly be applied to the elections taking place on September 22. Irrespective of the name of the new chancellor, or the coalition of parties that supports him, business interests will continue to determine political policy.

In order to prepare the way for an independent movement of the working class, it is necessary to learn the lessons from the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet Union.

Following the dissolution of the GDR twelve years ago, followed by the break-up of the Soviet Union, reactionary forces proclaimed the “failure” of socialism. Innumerable speeches, essays and books announced that Marxism had been finally refuted and capitalism had demonstrated its superiority over all other forms of society for all time.

Today the capitalist system itself is wracked by crisis. The introduction of the capitalist “free market” into Eastern Europe and Russia has resulted in the most catastrophic social decline ever experienced in a period of peace. The end of the Cold War has ushered in a new epoch of imperialist conflicts. The American government is determined to transform the oil-rich region of the Gulf into its own protectorate and is proceeding to wage war irrespective of whether Saddam Hussein allows weapons inspectors into the country or not.

Behind this aggressive stance lie profound changes in the economic structure of society. The globalisation of production has burst apart the national state system, in which capitalism has been historically anchored. The bourgeois class is unable to overcome the contradiction between world economy and the nation state other than by reverting to the violent re-division of the world.

The same basic conflict was the source of two world wars in the last century. At that time German imperialism sought to overcome the restrictions imposed upon it by the European state system and organise the continent on a new basis. Today it is American imperialism that is undertaking a new reorganisation of the world. Other great power states, including Germany, will not stand by idly and let that happen. This is clear from the measures undertaken to rearm the German military—measures supported by all the parties.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also had its roots in the crisis of the national state system. It was not socialism that failed, but rather its bitter enemy—Stalinism. In the 1920s and 1930s the Stalinist bureaucracy came to power, repudiating the revolutionary internationalist program and principles of the Bolshevik Party and ultimately transforming it into the apparatus of a privileged caste. To carry this out, the Stalin clique murdered the leaders of the October Revolution, suppressed all forms of workers democracy and replaced the Marxist programme of world socialist revolution with the nationalist programme of “socialism in one country”.

The attempt by the Stalinist bureaucracy to develop a national planned economy divorced from the resources of the world market was doomed to failure. In the longer term, the bureaucratically controlled state economies in Eastern Europe were unable to resist the growing pressures of globalisation. The bureaucracy itself recognised this and in the 1980s proceeded to embrace the bourgeois order. In the course of doing so, it sacrificed all of the gains made by the working class. This was the essence of the politics of perestroika undertaken by Mikhail Gorbachev.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has left behind a large residue of political confusion. The enormous crimes carried out by Stalinism in the name of socialism, the destruction of an entire generation of Marxists revolutionaries in the course of the purges in the 1930s and the decades-long suppression of any independent movement of the working class, dealt a severe blow to genuine socialist traditions which were at one time deeply anchored in the working class.

The profound crisis of capitalism establishes the conditions for these traditions to find a new audience. Irrespective of whether the new chancellor is called Schröder or Stoiber, the period after the elections in Germany will be characterised by extreme social conflict. Not long after the closing of the election booths this coming Sunday, the German people will be confronted with the consequences of the threatening world recession, the results of a war against Iraq and the costs of renewed military armament.

In former periods of crisis the German ruling class could depend on the SPD and the trade unions to suppress resistance and keep the situation under control. Now, however, the influence of these organisations has greatly diminished. Increasing numbers of workers and youth are seeking a new orientation. This creates the conditions for the construction of a new, broad movement of the working class.

The struggle for social equality must be at the heart of such a movement. Millions of people are personally experiencing the social crisis in the form of growing inequality. Declining incomes, insecure jobs, precarious provisions for old age and ill health, decaying schools and day-care facilities—these are the concerns that dominate everyday life. Such problems can and will be overcome when the enormous resources available to mankind—in terms of knowledge, technology and material resources—are utilised in a planned and rational manner, instead of being wasted and exploited to enhance the private fortunes of a tiny minority.

An international movement of the working class must base itself on an international strategy. The decline of social democracy and Stalinism demonstrates the bankruptcy of all national programmes. The working class can only combat global capitalism by uniting on an international basis. Globalisation has created the conditions for such unity. Workers all over the world confront the same multinational concerns; they are subjected to the same attacks on jobs and conditions and share the same problems.

Particularly in the US, the gulf between rich and poor has assumed extreme forms. The permanent “war against terror” with which the Bush government threatens the world is also aimed at securing internal stability. In the name of national security and the requirements of war, the government continually attacks democratic rights and is thereby establishing the conditions for an authoritarian state.

These are the conditions under which the defence of democratic rights, the struggle for the maintenance of living standards and the fight against war merge and come together. Such struggles constitute a powerful lever for drawing together the working class on an international basis. That is the core of the strategy of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its partisans in the US and Europe.

The public organ of the Fourth International, the *World Socialist Web Site*, embodies this perspective. It is the authentic voice of international Marxism. To the extent that the WSWS undertakes a daily analysis, commentary and estimation of the most important political developments,

it creates a unified worldview and effectively combats the destructive influence of nationalism. It is the scaffolding for the construction of an international, socialist party of the working class.



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