

Peter Schwarz from the PSG in Germany addresses WSWS-SEP conference

“Our party intervenes in the European election on an internationalist socialist program”

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Today we are publishing the remarks of Peter Schwarz, a Central Committee member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and member of the WSWS Editorial Board, to the conference on “The 2004 US Election: the Case for a Socialist Alternative” held by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party on March 13-14 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

A summary account of the event was published March 15, and the opening report to the conference by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP (US) National Secretary David North was posted March 17. Presidential candidate Bill Van Auken’s remarks were posted March 18, and vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence’s remarks were posted March 19. In the coming days, we will continue our coverage of this important political event, with remarks by other international delegates and contributions from the conference floor.

Dear comrades,

First of all, I would like to bring the fraternal greetings of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit to this historic conference.

Our members and the readers of the WSWS in Europe will follow its proceedings with the greatest interest. The development of an independent socialist movement in America, at the heart of US imperialism, is the key to the political situation, not only in the US, but internationally. It will have a profound impact on the thinking of workers all over the world.

The Iraq war demonstrated how closely the fate of the working class in Europe and internationally is bound up with the fate of the American working class. This war has shattered the conception that capitalism can be reconciled with peace and social justice—a conception on which the dominance of Social Democracy over the workers movement in Europe has been based.

For most people, the war came as a great shock. There is hardly a person in Europe—and particularly in Germany—who has not personally or through his parents and grandparents experienced the horrors of war. The lies and deceptions used by the Bush administration to prepare the war, its open rejection of international law and its bullying of governments opposed to the war created a widespread sense of anger and revulsion. When Bush appears on television, proudly proclaiming that he is a “war president,” for most European people this is the same as his proclaiming himself a child molester or mass murderer.

The massive opposition to the war found expression in the huge turnout at the demonstrations on February 15, 2003. In Europe alone more than 10 million people participated.

It was stressed yesterday that a central issue facing American Marxists over the course of decades has been the struggle for the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party. In Europe it is the break from the dominance of Social Democracy or—in Italy and France—Stalinism.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was largely discredited after the collapse of the Hitler regime in 1945. Because of its support for the first World War in 1914 and the miserable role it played during the Weimar Republic—where it opposed and oppressed all revolutionary struggles and in that way helped create the conditions for Hitler’s rise to power—the more advanced workers had turned away from Social Democracy.

The SPD’s revival in the postwar period was a result of the crimes of Stalinism, on the one hand, and the intervention of the United States in European affairs, on the other. The rapid economic recovery of West Germany, made possible by the Marshall Plan and the American insistence that the old antagonisms with France be settled, led to a general rise in the living standards of the working class and gave the reformist nostrums of the SPD some credibility.

The SPD, for its part, made Americanism its new religion. If there is any country where the Kennedy cult is bigger than in the US, it is Germany. There is hardly a German city—and certainly none governed by the Social Democrats—that does not have its prominent Kennedy Square or Kennedy Street. Even now, just a few months ago, a large celebration was held in front of the old West Berlin town hall to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Kennedy’s “Ich bin ein Berliner” [“I am a Berliner”] speech.

Considering the dependence of the SPD on the US, the opposition of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to the Iraq war could hardly have been of a principled character. His initial opposition—like that of French president Jacques Chirac—was motivated by the fear that the occupation of Iraq by the US would threaten German and French imperialist interests in the Middle East and destabilize the entire region.

But even this opposition was only half-hearted. It never went beyond the corridors of diplomacy. The German government refused to lock down American bases in Germany and German airspace for the war. It distanced itself from the antiwar demonstrations and put a gag order on every member of the government, instructing them not to participate in the protests. As soon as Baghdad was conquered, Germany and France reversed their positions and sanctioned the US-British occupation of Iraq in the United Nations.

Recently, Schröder was invited to the White House. After a dinner with Bush he described the conflict over the war as “past differences between friends.” He made this comment after the extent of the lies and tricks used to justify the war had been fully exposed. France, in the meantime, worked hand in glove with the Bush administration in removing the elected president of Haiti.

There are two reasons for this shameful capitulation to Bush.

The first relates to foreign policy. The German and French governments soon realized that they were not prepared for a confrontation with the US. Washington used its influence in Europe to form a pro-war alliance, led by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and incorporating the right-wing governments of Spain and Italy, as well as most of the Eastern European states scheduled to join the European Union (EU) this year. This divided the continent into—as US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it—“new” and “old Europe” and jeopardized German and French hegemony in the EU.

Germany and France have responded to this provocative behavior by adapting to Washington. At the same time they are building up their own independent military capacities. The German defense minister has recently announced a plan to completely restructure the German army. Instead of the 10,000 troops it has available now, 150,000 German soldiers will be ready for interventions all over the globe. The rest of the army will be engaged in logistics to support them.

The adaptation to Washington has by no means overcome the antagonisms between American and German imperialism that erupted during the Iraq war. These antagonisms are rooted in the crisis of world capitalism and will inevitably lead to further confrontations, including confrontations of a military nature.

The second reason for the capitulation to Bush relates to the class struggle in Europe itself.

The demonstrations against the war developed largely independently of the established parties and organizations. They were socially heterogeneous and politically confused, but, despite their limitations, they contained the real potential to develop into a larger movement against the social policies of the European governments.

Recent years have been characterized by ever more frontal attacks against the social and democratic rights of the working class, carried out by “left-wing” and right-wing governments alike. In fact, the terms “left” and “right” have all but lost their meaning in present day bourgeois politics. In Germany the coalition of the Social Democrats and Greens, since it took office in 1998, has abolished elements of the welfare state going all the way back to the Bismarck era 120 years ago.

In the 2002 German election Schröder played a risky game. He won an election that seemed already lost by appealing to the antiwar sentiments of broad sections of the population. But he had absolutely no intention of satisfying their social aspirations. Since the election, in a mixture of bureaucratic arrogance and accommodation to big business, his government has carried out attacks on the working class on an almost daily basis. This has led to a rapid erosion of the membership and the electoral base of the SPD. From 920,000 in 1990 the membership has declined to 650,000. Last year alone the party lost 50,000 members. In the opinion polls the SPD’s support stands at a record low of 25 percent, while the oppositional Christian Democrats have reached 50 percent.

The turn to the right and erosion of the Social Democrats is by no means a purely German phenomenon. In Britain Blair’s New Labour Party has embraced the program of Margaret Thatcher; in France the Socialists have never recovered from their disastrous defeat in the 2002 elections. In 1998, 11 out of 15 governments in the European Union were led by Social Democrats, 4 by conservatives. Now it is exactly the other way round.

In the final analysis, the sharpening conflict between US and European imperialism has eroded the foundations of the reformist policies of the SPD.

A number of political groups, which have supported the Social Democrats for decades, have been forced to recognize this. In recent months, there has been a host of initiatives to found new left-wing parties of one kind or another. In Britain a coalition called “Respect” has been formed behind the longstanding Labourite George Galloway. In France, the Pabloite LCR [Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire of Alain Krivine] is calling for a broad “anti-capitalist left,” embracing sections of the trade union bureaucracy, the Stalinist Communist Party, radical groups and the anti-globalization movement. In Germany a manifesto for a new party is being circulated within the trade union bureaucracy and has attracted a good deal of attention in the bourgeois press.

All these initiatives have one thing in common. They seek a return to the old-style reformist policies of the 1960s and 1970s. They defend the framework of the nation state and often promote some form of nationalism or regionalism. Generally, they are not free of anti-Americanism. All of them ignore the US working class as a political force and potential ally.

Such a perspective is unviable and reactionary. It creates a new trap for the working class. It is an obstacle to the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

In sharp contrast to these tendencies, our party intervenes in the European election on the basis of an internationalist socialist program. We are not trying to revive the reformist nostrums of the past, but work for an independent movement of the working class on an entirely different perspective. To the European Union, its institutions and its constitution, which we reject, we counterpose the perspective of a Europe united from below, the *United Socialist States of Europe*.

Europe has now one common parliament—with virtually no power; it can neither pass a law nor elect a government. This parliament is elected on a different basis from country to country. There is proportional voting in some country, majority voting in others. In some the vote is taken on a constituency basis, in others you vote for a national slate.

Our party will stand six candidates on a national slate in Germany. In other countries we are presently not in a position to stand. But we will campaign in other countries as well and our election manifesto will be translated into several languages.

In Germany we need 4,000 valid signatures to be admitted to the election. Collecting them is somewhat more complicated than here in the US. Every signature must carry the stamp of the town hall where the individual is registered, and every form must be signed twice. With the second signature you acknowledge that you are committing a punishable offence if you make some formal mistake.

Despite these obstacles the collection of the signatures went extremely well, much better than in previous elections in which we participated. When we said that we were building an alternative to the SPD, most people would sign. Some said: “I will sign anything that is against the SPD.” It is clear that the political situation is shifting rapidly and that a socialist, internationalist perspective is receiving a growing response.



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