

France: Amiens meeting discusses SEP campaigns in Europe and US

Antoine Lerougetel
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Peter Schwarz, WSWs editorial board member and leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (the German Socialist Equality Party) addressed a meeting organised by the WSWs readers group in Amiens on May 3. The gathering marked the launch in France of an international campaign in support of the US and European SEP candidates in this year's elections.

A team campaigning for the meeting at Jules Verne University in Amiens had received a warm response from students who expressed gratitude that someone was prepared to call for the withdrawal of the troops of the imperialist coalition from Iraq. The students understood that youth and workers in Europe and America were bearing the brunt of attacks on rights and conditions as the result of neo-liberal policies and that these attacks would only increase with the development of the arms race.

Particularly strong was the recognition, seen almost as a truism, that there was no solution within a national context and that a worldwide movement had to be built. From discussions held on the campus that morning, a group of students came to the meeting and took away a series of printed articles from the WSWs to study.

Chairing the meeting, attended by some 20 people—university and high school students, immigrant workers youth, teachers and education workers—Antoine Lerougetel explained, in his opening remarks, that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was fielding presidential and vice-presidential candidates Bill van Auken and Jim Laurence of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the American elections and the list headed by Uli Rippert of the German SEP in the elections to the European parliament taking place on June 13.

Lerougetel pointed out that these electoral campaigns of the ICFI in Europe and America were part of the fight to unify the international working class against the eruption of American and European militarism. The war in Iraq, he said, was an extension of the trade war between imperialist rivals that is also known as capitalist globalisation.

Peter Schwarz, speaking in French, said that May 1st had been a historic date with the accession of 10 new countries to the European Union (EU), making it the world's largest economic zone and the third largest political entity. "This event

has implications for the lives of millions of people, but the celebrations were limited to a small circle of the political elite."

He went on to say: "For the masses...the expansion of Europe is not going to serve their interests. On the contrary, the expansion to the east is going to intensify the social and political problems of the continent."

Schwarz pointed out that in general the official left and the trade unions supported the EU but tended to keep quiet about it—there was virtually no reference to it on the Paris May Day demonstration the previous Saturday.

In fact, he said, the far right was able, demagogically to exploit this: in Poland, the fascist Samoobrona (Self-Defence of the Polish Republic) had a score of 30 percent. "You can't say that 30 percent of Poles are fascists; but at the moment, Samoobrona is the only party talking about the disastrous social consequences of joining the EU."

"But saying no to both the governments' support for the EU and the right-wing opposition does not exhaust the subject. The working class cannot be indifferent to Europe's fate. It cannot yield Europe's future to the quarrelling factions of the bourgeoisie. It needs an independent line on the subject.... It must fight for a united socialist Europe, the United Socialist States of Europe.

"This perspective is at the core of our party's intervention in the European elections. Our aim is to lay the foundations for a new party, in opposition to the Social Democrats and the Stalinists, which will defend the interests of the workers, the youth, the unemployed and the aged.

"The most important international event," Schwarz said, "which has profoundly influenced the political situation in all countries, is the unprecedented eruption of American militarism." He pointed out that US imperialism was attempting to overcome its growing relative economic weakness and to defend its economic and political hegemony through military means: "The control of Iraqi oil gives the US a terrific means of pressure over its European and Asian rivals."

He stressed the growing social polarisation of the US, where a tiny, fabulously rich minority controls the two parties and the media. "The American working class is a giant in chains, which will be the greatest adversary of American imperialism once it is politically awakened.... The vast majority of the Iraqi

population is actively or passively opposed to the occupation, which is seen as a colonial occupation and not liberation from dictatorship.... The pictures of Iraqi prisoners, brutally and humiliatingly tortured by American and British soldiers...have inspired hatred against imperialism in the region.”

Quoting from the American SEP election statement, Schwarz stressed that the campaign’s two axes were the demand for the immediate withdrawal of the occupying troops from Iraq and the struggle for the independence of the working class based on a socialist programme. Also: “The SEP candidates will utilize the elections to develop a conscious sense of international unity among American working people and their class brothers and sisters all over the world.

“We see this fight for international unity as the most important task of our campaign. It is essential to inspire a genuinely worldwide movement against imperialism—one that opposes all forms of chauvinism, regardless of whether its reactionary appeal is based on religious, ethnic or national identity.”

The American SEP’s statement affirmed the necessity for the working class to break from the Democratic Party and to reject the politics of the so-called lesser evil, “truly a dead end for the working class. There is no shortcut in the struggle against imperialist war and social reaction. It is necessary to undertake now the construction of an independent, mass socialist party.”

Schwarz stressed that “The initial opposition of Chirac and Schröder, the German chancellor, against the war was motivated by their own imperialist interests in the Middle East, which were threatened by the American offensive. They never had the slightest intention of calling on the European or American people to oppose the war.” After the fall of Baghdad, they had adapted to Bush and voted to support the occupation in the UN.

Schwarz finished his report by saying:

“The main task is to build a political alternative to the bankrupt parties of the official left and the trade unions. The only basis for building such a movement in an internationalist and socialist perspective.

“Our aim is not to ‘rally the anti-capitalist left’—that means all the radical movements, including dissident socialists and Stalinists. Our aim is to unite the working class. This involves a process of political clarification. It is necessary to raise the level of political debate; it is necessary to differentiate the Marxist programme from all the varieties of reformism and opportunism.

“That is the purpose of our participation in the European elections.”

A wide-ranging discussion followed the main report. A former Communist Party member questioned whether the Socialist and Communist parties could be described as bourgeois since the CP in particular had a worker membership. He asserted that it was legitimate and sometimes profitable for workers’ organisations to collaborate with the bourgeoisie and

supported the left’s call for a vote for incumbent president Jacques Chirac in the second round of the presidential elections in 2002.

Schwarz replied that the Communist Party was a bourgeois party because its policies were pro-capitalist. Some churches had a majority of working-class members—this did not make them working class institutions. What defines a party are its programme and social base, he argued. It is a basic tenet of Marxism, moreover, that a working-class party does not enter a bourgeois government as the French Communist Party had done many times, Schwarz explained.

The Stalinist sympathiser also cited the Swedish model as a positive example of class collaboration. An audience member questioned the Swedish model of the welfare state and the class collaboration it had involved. The Swedish reformist project had been unable to resist the impact of globalisation and was in the process of collapse. Others in the audience pointed out that the vote for Chirac had paved the way for the massive attacks on rights now being imposed by the Chirac/Raffarin government.

Questions relating to the ecology movement and the use of atomic power, how to define the working class, and the attitude of the ICFI to the anti-capitalist globalisation movement were also raised.

Peter Schwarz related the experience in Germany with the Greens. The latter, who had once advanced the idea that pacifism and social solidarity as well as environmental questions could be achieved within capitalism, had now become supporters of the remilitarisation of German imperialism and had imposed harsh austerity measures on the working class.

Schwarz said that the working class was the vast majority of humankind who had to sell their labour power to earn a living. The mass mobilisations that had developed against the effects of capitalist globalisation such as those seen in Seattle and Genoa had reflected the real feelings of wide layers of the population. However, the parties and organisations involved with those mass mobilizations had no policies for breaking with capitalism or developing the independent interests of the working class. He reiterated that the task was not to unite the parties of the left but to unite the working class on a socialist and internationalist program.



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