

German SEP candidate in the European elections: “For full democratic and social rights for all refugees and immigrants”

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Celia Sokolowsky is one of the candidates of the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) for the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. The PSG are conducting their election campaign in collaboration with the Socialist Equality Party in Britain.

For no other reason than being of the “wrong” origin, millions of people in Europe today are totally or partially deprived of basic democratic rights and forced to live in squalid conditions.

Refugees and immigrants constitute that part of the European working class that is subjugated to the most extreme forms of oppression. Their defence against the deprivation of legal rights, against humiliation and against the criminal practice of deportation is not only an elementary demand of human solidarity, but also an indispensable part of the struggle against the attacks taking place on the democratic rights and social gains of the entire population of Europe.

During the past 15 years, the number of wars and civil wars has not diminished. The persecution of political, ethnic and religious minorities—as well as social misery—has increased in many parts of the globe. But all European states have curtailed and undermined the right to asylum, so that this fundamental right has all but ceased to exist in the European Union.

Out of the hundreds of millions of people who are forced to flee and leave their homes worldwide, only a small percentage ever make it to the European continent. Whoever knocks on the gates of the European fortress has no effective means to enter the EU legally. The EU has defined itself as a conglomeration of states surrounded by a ring of so-called “secure non-member states.” This policy has had terrible consequences, leading to the creation of a mafia-like business of trafficking human beings. These gangs rob the refugees of their last belongings, smuggle them into Europe and force them to work for years just to repay their horrendous transport fees. Hundreds die during attempts to cross the borders illegally.

Formerly, during the period of the “Iron Curtain,” the sealed border erected by the Stalinist regimes against Western Europe was regarded as proof of the repressive and anti-democratic nature of the Eastern bloc. Today, the EU does not even bother to draw up official statistics about the number of people dying and being injured at its borders. The anti-racism organisation United, which collects press reports about tragic incidents at the European borders, has documented that during the past 11 years at least 4,000 people lost their lives trying to enter the EU illegally. The real number is estimated to be much higher.

Those refugees who nevertheless manage to enter the EU and apply

for asylum cannot expect humane treatment by the state authorities. A large proportion of them are sent to camps where hygiene is often minimal and there is no privacy, not to speak of respect for the special needs of children, pregnant women, ill or aged people. These camps, which are often located in remote places, isolate the asylum-seekers from the rest of the population. Conditions there intensify feelings of despair as well as aggression among the inmates, many of whom have passed through traumatic experiences.

The rights of asylum-seekers are extremely limited. In Germany, for example, they are not allowed to leave the administrative district in which they live. They receive only limited medical care and, as a rule, are not allowed to choose their doctor freely. Denied permission to find employment, the allowance they receive is so small that they cannot possibly pay a lawyer to support their legal claim to asylum. They may also be held in custody for months without having committed any legal offence.

In the end, most refugees are granted neither asylum nor a residence permit for a limited period of time. The following figures for Germany are typical for a trend that has characterised the European Union for the past decade. In the mid-1980s, an average of 20 percent of all applicants were granted asylum, but by the mid-1990s this quota had declined to 11 percent under the conservative Kohl government. Since the Social Democratic Party and the Greens took power and formed a coalition in 1998, there has been a further dramatic drop to 3.4 percent.

Most asylum-seekers whose applications have been rejected are threatened with deportation to the country from which they had fled. Every year, about 200,000 people are deported by the most brutal means from EU countries to their so-called “secure” states of origin, where they are handed over to the police authorities at the airport. In most cases, their fate remains unknown and is not of the slightest interest to the deporting authorities.

There is a definite method behind all these forms of harassment directed against asylum-seekers, who rank as some of the most vulnerable sections of society. It is the stated aim of the political establishment to achieve a certain degree of “deterrence” by this appalling treatment, in order to discourage the poor and oppressed around the word from trying to find a better life in Europe.

The number of “illegal residents” has increased proportionately as legal possibilities to enter the EU have diminished. It is estimated that (before Eastern expansion on May 1) 5 to 7 million “illegal” immigrants live on EU territory.

Lacking legal status, these people are effectively deprived of all

rights and legal guarantees. Living under the continuous threat of discovery and deportation, they can easily be subjected to blackmail and extreme forms of exploitation. Often, they work for starvation wages under conditions that make a mockery of all safety and protective regulations. Excluded from the Social Security system, in the case of illness or unemployment they are entirely dependent on a shaky net of relations and contacts, family and friends or charity organisations.

The restrictive immigration legislation of the European countries and the *de facto* abolition of the right to asylum in the EU have resulted in a continuous growth of this group. At the same time, the political establishment exploits them in two ways. On the one hand, the “illegal immigrants” are denounced as scapegoats and blamed for undermining the social system and wages. They are accused of being responsible for the decline of living standards and the dismantling of the welfare state in Europe. On the other hand, the existence of this unofficial labour market is used as a deliberate lever to enforce the general introduction of cheap labour, further attacks on social entitlements and the privatisation of social services.

The conditions under which illegal immigrants work and survive are a harbinger of what European governments have in store for working people across the continent—the destruction of all social provisions that limit the maximisation of profit, the abolition of social security provided for by the state and its replacement by private insurance, combined with support from the family charity organisations. What is especially despicable is the attempt by the ruling elite to divert attention from their own role and lay the blame for the consequences of their policies on people who have no rights and cannot defend themselves—illegal immigrants, refugees and “foreigners” in general. In so doing, they seek to channel legitimate social discontent, anger and frustration into xenophobia and racism.

Every attack on the social status and democratic rights of immigrants is directed against the population as a whole. Invariably, attacks on “foreigners,” who have the smallest of lobbies, are trial runs for more general assaults. A very clear example for this is the armament of the state and the thoroughly undemocratic police-state structures being developed at EU level.

For example, the routine registration of biometrical data such as fingerprints, which are then stored in data banks accessible to police on a Europe-wide basis, was first introduced and tested on asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, this practice has been widened to apply to anybody seeking an entry visa into the EU and is scheduled to be extended to the whole of the population. From the year 2006, every European applying for a passport will be required to have his or her biometrical data taken, which will then be accessible to all police stations in a virtually unlimited manner. This procedure greatly enhances the possibility for governments to spy on people without any legal control and without the slightest evidence of criminal behaviour.

Under the demagogic claim to fight “criminal acts by foreigners” and terrorism, numerous anti-democratic measures and laws have been passed by EU institutions or individual member states. Many more such regulations are being prepared—from the internal use of the military, to legal means for arresting and deporting people who are considered a “threat” (although no concrete danger has to be proven), right up to the demand for extra-legal killings, recently mooted by German Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) in his warning: “If you like death, you can have it!”

It would be an illusion to expect that any of the measures or police rights mentioned above will be used merely in genuine cases of

terrorism or that they might be withdrawn at a later point in time. No such measures have ever been retracted in the past; they invariably served as the basis for the further curtailment of democratic rights and liberties. All the measures decided upon by the European Union in the course of its so-called fight against terrorism have been formulated in such wide-ranging terms that they can be employed against any oppositional movement.

Working people in Europe can only defend and expand their democratic rights, their past social gains and their living standards, if they refuse to be split by origin, skin colour or religion. In their own interests, they must reject the witch-hunt against immigrants and refugees, and join together with them to establish the social and legal equality of all people living in Europe.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and the Socialist Equality Party demand an end to the brutal European border regime and full democratic and social rights for all immigrants. People who have been forced to flee their homeland must be granted asylum and security in Europe, one of the richest regions of the world. “Illegal” workers and their families must be granted full legal rights and human dignity. All immigrants must have the same social and legal status as people born in Europe, enabling them to enjoy the same rights as everybody else in society. We call for publicly financed programmes to counter the poverty and unemployment that plagues immigrant families more than others. We reject all repressive measures that are currently being introduced, such as the banning of Islamic headscarves and compulsory courses on “integration.” All special laws that apply only to immigrants must be abolished.

We reject the limitation of the free movement of labour that has been introduced as part of the Eastern enlargement of the EU. Most of the old EU member states do not allow people from the accession countries to settle and find work.

If workers from countries such as Germany, Poland, Great Britain, France, Lithuania, Slovakia and Sweden seek to stop the downward spiral of wages and conditions, they should not see themselves as national competitors, but should join together in a common fight to raise living standards throughout Europe.

The European continent, which historically has suffered the most horrific consequences of nationalism, can only be united and overcome national divisions and competition, if the European and international working class unites on a common political programme and asserts its joint interests against the big corporations and banks, against the diktats of the international financial organisations, against the EU bureaucracy in Brussels and against the policies of all the bourgeois governments pursuing their own national interests.



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