

Election alternative: Jobs and Social Justice—a new reformist trap for German workers

Ute Reissner
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A new political formation calling itself “Election Alternative: Jobs and Social Justice” will hold a national congress in Berlin on June 20. This project is a dishonest manoeuvre by longstanding social democratic functionaries and some of their left advisers. Its purpose is to strangle growing popular opposition to the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and its leader, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

The main aim of the new formation is to prevent a political and programmatic settling of accounts with social democracy. With the SPD government demonstrating the dead end of social democratic reformism, Election Alternative proposes that workers direct their efforts into the hopeless task of reviving a perspective that has proven itself to be bankrupt.

The organisation apparently believes it can ignore with impunity more than 100 years of experience with social democracy.

Nearly all of the initiators of Election Alternative are people with decades-long careers within the SPD or its trade union periphery. They come from two groups that emerged independently of one another at about the same time—March of this year. Both arose in response to the massive losses suffered by the SPD in both votes and members. The congress of June 20 is intended to ratify unification into a single organisation that will be formally launched two weeks later.

One of the groups, “Election Alternative 2006,” comes from the left wing of the West German Social Democratic Party—in particular, those forces that in the 1990s were close to former SPD leading light Oskar Lafontaine.

When the SPD and the Greens assumed power in a “Red-Green” coalition government in 1998 and subsequently embarked on a course of rabid social cuts, some of these social democrats resigned and joined the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the successor party to the former ruling Stalinist party in East Germany. In the national elections of 2002, the PDS failed to qualify for parliamentary representation, after which the former SPD dissidents decided it was time to leave this sinking ship as well.

The main representative of this group is Ralf Krämer, who initiated Election Alternative with an informal discussion paper circulated in the trade unions early this year. Krämer, who was born in 1960, heads the department for economic policy of the national executive of Ver.di, the German public service workers’ union. He began his political career as leader of the Social Democratic youth organisation of North Rhine Westphalia, the most populous and most industrialised state of West Germany. He later joined the SPD executive of that state. In 1999, he resigned from the SPD, and in 2001 joined the PDS.

Another leading figure of Election Alternative comes from a similar background. Uwe Hiksche, born in 1964, joined the SPD in 1982, held numerous party posts at various levels, and eventually joined the executive of the Bavarian SPD. In 1998, he was elected to parliament with a large majority in his constituency. In 1999, he resigned from the SPD, joined the PDS and became its speaker on European policy. In autumn of

2002, when the PDS had failed to re-enter the national parliament, he briefly became its general secretary, but lost this position in the summer of 2003.

Then there is Joachim Bischoff, born in 1944. He is the editor of *Sozialismus*, a newspaper published in Hamburg that concentrates on trade union issues. He, too, joined the PDS during the 1990s and briefly served on its national executive. He is still a member of the PDS commission responsible for “programmatic fundamentals.”

Other founding members of Election Alternative include Frieder Wolf, a former Green deputy of the European parliament, Axel Troost, who is a member of a fairly well-known group of Keynesian economists in Bremen, and Sabine Lösing of Attac.

The second group, which calls itself “Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice,” also comes from the ranks of the SPD. Six of its seven members—Thomas Händel, Anny Heike, Peter Vetter, Klaus Ernst, Gerd Lobodda and Günther Schachner—head different locals of the Bavarian section of the IG Metall trade union. With the exception of Heike, they were all members of the SPD for more than 30 years (Vetter was a 43-year veteran of the SPD). Lobodda, a member of the SPD for 38 years, sat on the board of the now-bankrupt electronics firm Grundig in Nürnberg as a union representative, and has had a long career in the upper ranks of IG Metall.

The final member of Initiative, with 40 years in the SPD, is Professor Herbert Schui from the University of Politics and Economy in Hamburg.

With the exception of Schui and Schachner—the latter’s case has not yet been decided—the founders of “Jobs and Social Justice” have been expelled from the SPD.

The starting point of both component groups of “Election Alternative: Jobs and Social Justice” is concern over the alienation of ever-broader layers of the population from official politics. “Voter turnout, election results and membership of the parties illustrate that many citizens feel betrayed by the policies of Agenda 2010 [Schröder’s programme for dismantling the welfare state], but do not see any alternative and thus decide to abstain from politics altogether,” Election Alternative wrote in its first public statement on March 15, 2004. “This is a growing problem not only for active trade unionists,” the statement declared.

Arno Klönne, a professor of sociology sympathetic to the project, warned: “It will not help the left if more and more people forgo participation in official political life.”

The first proclamation of the Bavarians’ Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice, which was published a few days prior to the initial statement of Election Alternative, explained: “The numerous resignations of SPD members and the large number of abstentions in recent weeks by voters from the social democratic spectrum demonstrate that many citizens are turning their backs on politics, feeling betrayed by the SPD but not represented by any other party. We feel that this development poses a threat to our democracy.”

This statement of the Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice outlined the

extreme turn to the right by the SPD. “The SPD has renounced its principles,” it wrote. “Contrary to its election promises of 1998 and 2002, when it posed as an alternative to the neo-liberal policies of its predecessors, it has emerged as the main exponent of social cuts and the redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of society.” The Initiative enumerated a long list of attacks by the SPD on social conditions in the fields of labour relations, pensions, health care and education.

These trade unionists’ reaction to the SPD’s abandonment of its former reformist policies reflected the reflex of apparatchiks who fear losing control over their subordinates. They seek to keep workers ideologically tied to the existing social order—even if the material preconditions for the social concessions that formed the basis for reformist politics have ceased to exist.

“To abstain from voting and retreat into a form of internal emigration is no solution,” they continued (emphasis in the original). “Precisely because, following the SPD’s change of course, there is no relevant, organised political group forming a counter-pole to the neo-liberal restructuring of our society, we seek to become politically active for the defence of our welfare state.

“We propose an alliance with all political forces and individuals who are actively working for the preservation and expansion of the welfare state, which must be financed in a socially just manner.

“Out of this alliance, there may emerge a viable electoral social alternative for the next national election. We explicitly raise this possibility.” Initiative went out of its way, however, to stress that it did not wish to harm the SPD, but rather to pressure it.

The same orientation was articulated by Election Alternative, which proclaimed that a new electoral alliance “makes sense, if only to set up a barrier blocking the further movement of the SPD to the right.” It continued in its initial announcement: “The more catastrophic the election results for the SPD (and possibly the Greens), the greater the inner-party sentiment to somewhat push back the forces that have dictated the capital-oriented course of the recent past, and to place more emphasis on social policies that oppose those of the CDU, CSU and FDP [Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union and Free Democratic Party—the main parliamentary rival parties to the SPD and the Greens]. Pressure from a social opposition within parliament would help this process.”

As these lines make very clear, the initiators of the new formation refuse to draw any lessons from the political bankruptcy of the SPD or its historical evolution. Nowhere do they attempt to critically explain their own political history in this party or in the PDS. Nowhere do they seriously confront the objective or programmatic reasons for the failure of social reformism.

On the contrary, their entire project is designed to prevent any discussion of these questions among workers and divert their attention from the fundamental issues they pose. They draw a picture of reality that is both false and arbitrary, in order to argue the case for a hopelessly utopian political programme: a return to the reform policies of the early 1970s.

This orientation is summed up in a discussion document entitled “Our Reply to Some Questions and Objections,” which was published on April 22 on the now-joint web site of Initiative and Election Alternative. The following quotations are all taken from this document.

“The decisive issue,” it says, “is not whether a political force strives to abolish capitalism, but what policies and interests it advances here and now.” This echoes a key passage in the very first statement issued by Election Alternative: “The issue today is not ‘reform or revolution,’ but social reformism versus a deepening of neo-liberal reaction.”

This manner of posing the issue is based on a misrepresentation of reality, which immediately becomes clear on further consideration. Why has social democracy quite openly ceased to represent the interests of the working people “here and now”? The reason is that the crisis of the world

capitalist system has reached such a stage that social democracy’s basic defence of capitalism can no longer be reconciled with a policy of social reforms.

The question of “what policies and interests” a party advances “here and now” is directly determined by whether or not the party aims to abolish capitalism. Hence, the question “reform or revolution” is the most immediate, decisive programmatic issue that must be carefully considered by all those searching for a serious reply to the failure of social democracy.

This conclusion is vehemently denied by all those involved in the formation of Election Alternative: Jobs and Social Justice. All of these ladies and gentlemen base their orientation on the Bremen-based group Alternative Economic Policies, which is represented by Axel Troost. This group claims that the globalisation of production under capitalism must not necessarily lead to the domination of neo-liberal policies. Rather, Troost and company insist that the critical question is how the profits reaped by any national economy are distributed among the people of a given country. The problem, they say, lies not in the sphere of production, but rather of distribution, and the solution is a return to the Keynesian policies of the post-war era.

This separation of production and distribution is artificial and at odds with reality. While this question cannot be dealt with in detail in this article, it must be said that the globalisation of production does indeed undermine the existing national political institutions. Multinational corporations are able to dictate their demands to national bourgeois governments. This reality, which workers have been experiencing on a daily basis for years, has obviously not yet penetrated into the study chambers of the “left” professors.

The “neo-liberal reconstruction of society” bewailed by Election Alternative is rooted not simply in the bad intentions of rotten SPD leaders, but rather in objective developments within world economy, to which the erstwhile reform party is reacting with its sharp change in course. This general offensive against the conditions, rights and past gains of the working class can be fought only if the working class carries out a political break with social reformism, shakes off the historical burden of the SPD, and returns to the revolutionary policies of Marxism, which aim at overcoming capitalism on a global basis.

The twentieth century has demonstrated that it is impossible to tame capitalism by means of social reformist policies. At every critical turning point in history, the social democrats defended this existing social order by ceding power to the most reactionary forces and abandoning previous reforms. These lessons, which were written in disastrous defeats for the working class, fascist barbarism, and the bloody toll of two world wars, must be carried into broad layers of the working people, in order to bring about not only an organisational but also a political break with social democracy. This is the only viable basis for serious resistance and the re-emergence of a genuine revolutionary movement.

This perspective, which is advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, is truly horrifying to the advocates of Election Alternative. They wish to avoid even the word “left.”

These neo-reformists write: “This [their initiative] is not about a new left party between the SPD and the PDS, nor a party to the left of the PDS, but rather something new, different and broader.... The issue is not to push through radical and far-reaching positions in opposition to others, but to formulate the broadest, viable and attractive positions based on our discussions. It is not for us to erect principles upon which to model the movement.”

This last formulation, which alludes to a quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, is a very clear illustration of the differences between Marxist politics and those of Election Alternative.

Under the heading “Proletarians and Communists,” Karl Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: “They [the Communists] do not set up

any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.... The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes."

This conception is the exact opposite of that proposed by Election Alternative, which is determined to stubbornly close its eyes to the actual historical development. It regards the globalisation of production, which is based on the most revolutionary development of the productive forces since the early twentieth century, as insignificant, and interprets the reaction of social democracy to this change as a purely subjective error on the part of the party leadership, which can supposedly be corrected by pressure from below.

The fallacy of this assumption has been underlined by the experience of recent years. All social democratic parties in Europe have reacted to pressure from below not with a turn to the left, but with an ever more aggressive turn to the right.

It is no accident that Election Alternative never attempts to explore the objective driving forces behind the current crisis of the SPD. Only by avoiding any such analysis can it seek to keep opposition to the "neo-liberal policies" of this party at the lowest possible political level. To suppress a discussion on fundamental programmatic issues, this group continuously stresses the necessity for a "common political practice" aimed at "shifting the relation of social forces in favour of working people and the socially disadvantaged."

"The issue is," Election Alternative explains in the document quoted above, "to halt the dominant social reactionary and aggressive development of capitalism and to implement a different policy and direction. This can be achieved only in the course of establishing new relations of social forces, which will make possible new social compromises. History has demonstrated that, under capitalism, such compromises are possible, albeit they are always limited and endangered. Fundamental criticisms of capitalism and discussions on means and ways to overcome it do have their place in the framework of a social alternative. However, they should not inhibit our common political practice."

The alienation of various layers from the established parties, the document states at a later point, should be addressed "without frightening people away with radical verbal slogans or unwarranted controversies about the possibility of reforming capitalism."

This theme is repeated in countless variations. Election Alternative can accept anything except "verbal radicalism" and "left-wing sectarianism," by which it means Marxist policies.

The caveat that ways and means for overcoming capitalism may be discussed—inconspicuously and as a secondary question—amounts to an invitation to all defenders of social reformism (and the SPD) on the petty-bourgeois "left" to participate in the new project. A number of them have already responded.

The argument repeated by Election Alternative in many articles, interviews and statements is as follows: First of all, the influence of neo-liberal policies must be pushed back, and the means to do this is the mobilisation of people for their immediate interests. Discussions about the abolition of capitalism are irrelevant and must be postponed. The mobilisation of large numbers will change the relation of social forces and thus make possible a return to the policies of social compromise.

This line of reasoning is based on false and illusionary assumptions. A policy based on these premises will achieve the exact opposite of its stated aims. It is false to claim that the "dominance of neo-liberalism" is due to a lack of mobilisation by ordinary people, and it is ridiculous to claim that workers are ignorant of their social grievances. On the contrary, mass protests around the world against the Iraq war and against social cuts have shown that they are quite prepared to fight.

However, to develop and actually change the "relation of forces," this social opposition must be armed with an understanding of the nature of the world crisis of capitalism and its implications. Workers are not yet conscious of the fact that their interests cannot be reconciled with the continued existence of the capitalist order, and that they need a new party, not to put pressure on other social forces but to take political power into their own hands.

The project and conceptions put forward by Election Alternative serve to block the development of clarity on these questions, and in this way to provide support for the SPD—if not from within, then from without. They attempt to hold back the leftward movement that is beginning to emerge among broad layers of working people, and prevent them from finding a political way forward. The inevitable outcome of this project and its programme of protest and pressure on the powers that be is to exhaust and ultimately demoralise the emerging movement of social and political opposition.

Against this background, it is not surprising that Election Alternative does not direct its appeal to the working people as such, but rather describes itself as "linking people...who are primarily active in trade unions and other interest groups, movements, organisations and social, political, scientific and cultural initiatives and projects."

This description suits the interests of former mediators of social compromise who, in the face of the alienation of social democracy from its former base, are in danger of losing not only their political role, but also their positions and sources of income. If one looks a bit closer, one perceives that the so-called mobilisation for "a changed relation of social forces, which will make possible new social compromises" reflects the longing of stranded functionaries for a return to the feeding troughs of establishment politics.

In this regard, it is instructive to read some past statements of Election Alternative's personnel. After the electoral defeat of the PDS in 2002, that party was thrown into crisis and a heated debate broke out. Ralf Krämer, Election Alternative's initiator, wrote a contribution to the inner-party debate in May-June 2003 that criticised the PDS for forming a coalition with the SPD in the city council of Berlin.

Though he accused his party of "crossing the Rubicon" by overseeing vicious social cuts, he made clear that his opposition was not of a principled nature: "As a trade unionist and former left-wing social democrat, all I can say is that I am not at all inclined to opposition as a matter of principle. I am entirely in favour of fighting for majorities and for government responsibility in the framework of capitalism. It goes without saying that this includes coalitions with other parties to take forward socialist aims and to push back the dominant forces of capital" (quoted from "What Kind of Party does the Socialist and Trade Union Left Need," published on the web site of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which is affiliated to the PDS).

This orientation is identical with that of the Greens in their earlier period. The present role of the Green Party in the German government is well known. If Election Alternative should indeed form a party, it will very soon follow in the Greens' footsteps. It will renounce the reformist aims it now proclaims and participate, directly or indirectly, in brutal attacks on the working people.



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