

The Monday Demonstrations in Germany—1989 and today

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party)
25 August 2004

The ongoing demonstrations against the social cuts contained in the “Hartz IV” act have resurrected an unresolved political conflict from the time of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in 1989/90—the antagonistic interests between rich and poor, between labour and capital on a global scale.

The debate that has broken out in Germany on whether or not today’s demonstrations stand in the tradition of the Monday demonstrations of 1989 reflects the differentiation of that past movement. It contained two camps that stand opposed to each other today. The slogan “We are the People!” that accompanied the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) concealed the existence of quite opposing aspirations and ambitions within the movement against the Stalinist bureaucracy.

In the one camp, there were those for whom the call for democracy was merely a catchphrase for tearing down the limitations placed by the East German state upon their personal enrichment. This was the opposition against Stalinism from the right. On the other hand, there were those who no longer wanted to tolerate bureaucratic oppression and were striving to create a more humane, more tolerant and open-minded society—the opposition from the left.

The majority of the population, whatever its confusion, clearly belonged to the latter camp. They lost out in the end, and had to bury their hopes because they lacked clarity about their social position and interests. They had no clear understanding about the nature of society in East Germany and the Soviet Union. They had no correct estimation of the role of Stalinism and harboured illusions about the state of capitalism on a world scale.

The questions that remained unclarified then must be taken up now. A correct appraisal of the events of 1989/90 is a vital prerequisite for the development of a progressive perspective today. The essence of this appraisal and perspective is that the working class can only take a step forward if it begins to conceive of itself as an international class and acts accordingly. Both the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the rabid attacks on the social position of working people today stem from the international economic and political crisis of capitalism as a world system, and they have to be answered from that standpoint.

This is the only approach that opens up an understanding of the nature of the Soviet Union and the former states of the Eastern bloc. Their existence was an expression of a peculiar historical stalemate in the international class struggle. Although the Russian

workers, by conquering power in 1917, had taken the first step towards the socialist transformation of the world, the international working class suffered a series of major defeats during the 1920s. Under the ensuing conditions of isolation and backwardness, a new social layer rose to power in the Soviet state and party apparatus. This layer, represented by Stalin, lived as a parasite off the nationalized property relations, established a dictatorial regime at home and collaborated with bourgeois governments and forces abroad in order to prevent any further progress of the revolution in other parts of the world.

The countries ruled by the Stalinists were not capitalist, as the historical origins of the nationalized property relations lay in the October 1917 Revolution. But neither were they socialist, because social inequality and oppression continued. State power was wielded by a privileged bureaucracy that was heading not towards socialism, but back to capitalism.

This ruling layer opted in favour of the reintroduction of capitalist relations when it became impossible to defend its social standing within the framework of a nationally isolated economy. This situation arose out of the globalisation of production that had enormously accelerated during the 1980s.

As the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), predecessor of the SEP in Germany, wrote in its statement of October, 20, 1989:

“There are only two ways to overcome the economic crisis of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states, which is rooted in their isolation from the resources of world economy:

“* the capitalist way, i.e., the reintegration of these states into the capitalist world market through the restoration of capitalist property relations and exploitation, in the course of which the Stalinist bureaucracy, basing itself on the imperialist banks and corporations in the West and on the upper layers of its local petty bourgeoisie, transforms itself into a new ruling capitalist class;

“* or the socialist way, i.e., defending the planned economy and purging it of all bureaucratic deformations through the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the extension of socialist property relations to the capitalist world through the completion of the world socialist revolution.”

Basing itself on Leon Trotsky’s analysis and on the entire history of the Fourth International, the BSA again and again drew out these fundamental issues. In its program of February 1990, the BSA warned:

“The working class is at a crossroads: capitalism or socialism. Either the imperialists, together with the regimes of Gorbachev,

Mazowiecki, Modrow ... reintroduce capitalism, or the working class completes the political revolution, overthrows the Stalinist bureaucracy, takes power into its own hands and builds a truly socialist society.”

There was no third way, because the collapse of the Stalinist regimes was rooted in the same contradictions that drove global capitalism into its deepest crisis since the end of the Second World War. Central to these contradictions is that between the world economy and the nation state. “With the breakdown of Stalinism,” we said at the time, “the chain of imperialism has broken at its weakest link.”

Under these conditions, there could be no peaceful, democratic development of Germany in the wake of capitalist reunification. “A new phase of bourgeois-democratic development,” the BSA wrote, “would be possible only if capitalism could stabilize for a long period. But that is impossible. The impending reunification will not only bring massive attacks on the rights and social achievements of the working class. It brings German imperialism face to face with the same task it has tried to solve twice in this century by means of war and fascism.”

This sober assessment was counterposed to all those who assembled at the “round table” called by the Stalinist SED regime at the time and blustered about building a democratic, peaceful and socially progressive Germany, reunited under capitalism. While some of them were just muddle-headed, one force was keenly conscious of its aims and intentions: The Stalinist turncoats of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) that was just changing its name to Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). As long as they had based their power upon nationalised property relations, they had hidden behind Marxist phraseology. Now, supporting capitalist restoration, they spouted reformist rhetoric. Gregor Gysi, as their speaker at the time, joined the Social Democrats in proclaiming that the issue now was to “see how a humane, socially just and democratic capitalism can be devised in the coming Germany.”

The PDS has continued to play this role with great consistency. They speak about resistance and social justice, while implementing brutal cuts wherever they form part of the government on a communal or state level.

Not a few in 1990 judged the perspective of international socialism as “unrealistic” compared to the supposedly more “realistic” option of a humane and socially reformed version of capitalism. Clearly, it is time to thoroughly reconsider and revise that conception. Today, the same question continues to stand. There is no “realistic” progressive alternative to the program of international socialism.

This is the balance sheet of the years since 1989/90. The crisis of world capitalism, which the BSA pointed to as the reason for the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, has intensified dramatically during the past 15 years. The strongest capitalist power, the US, is ruled by a gang of criminals in the service of the largest and most powerful American corporations. The Bush administration is waging war against its own people and abroad. The invasion of Iraq signifies the return of imperialism to open colonial subjugation, and Germany is following suit under the Schröder government.

Throughout the world, the social crisis is getting worse. It is

plain for all to see that the rabid social cuts carried out in Germany under the heading “Hartz IV” are taking place in all countries of the European Union.

If the opposition movement against these attacks is not to be betrayed like the movement against Stalinism 15 years ago, then its most conscious and serious participants must draw the lessons of this past experience. Do not allow a promising social movement from below to be misused for reactionary political ends once again!

The attacks of the Schröder government, which are supported by all establishment parties, cannot be stopped by mere pressure. They are the result not merely of political mistakes, but of a historic crisis of the capitalist system on a world scale, a crisis that has developed under the surface of the postwar period and is now taking ever more violent forms. There is no other realistic answer to this crisis than the building of a new, international Marxist party.

In the interest of coming generations, this task cannot be postponed. The political lessons from the experience with Stalinism should be drawn while they are still fresh and vivid, and before the social criminals around Schröder, Stoiber, Merkel, etc., throw society into a state in which resistance will become ever more difficult.

Those forces who promote a return to the reform policies of the 1970s lie in very much the same manner as the PDS and the SPD were lying in 1989/90, when they promised social justice under capitalism. These people are hiding their own greed for power and wealth behind false promises—we are speaking here about Oskar Lafontaine and his followers in the “Election Alternative.” The question whether capitalism can be socially reformed under today’s conditions has been definitively answered once again during the past 15 years. Today’s demonstrations are taking place precisely because all efforts to that effect have failed.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is the most important instrument for the building of a new, international Marxist party. We call upon all supporters and sympathisers to read its analyses and reports, to form readers’ groups and to join the SEP.



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