Germany: Election Alternative glorifies the state

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The organisation Election Alternative Jobs and Social Justice (WASG) recently published the text of a speech by Detlev Hensche delivered at the end of November to a delegate conference of the group held in Nuremberg. Delegates agreed at the conference to transform the WASG into a party.

Hensche's speech was the highpoint of the conference and was supposed to sketch out the programmatic framework for the new party. At the same time, delegates decided to postpone all discussion of differences until a so-called "programmatic Party Congress" is held in the spring.

For many years, Hensche was chairman of the IG Medien trade union. Last year, he resigned from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in protest against the anti-social policies of SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's government and joined the WASG. His speech was titled "For a Political Alternative."

His hour-long speech was extremely thin on both politics and alternatives. Hensche limited his remarks almost exclusively to seizing on the widespread opposition to welfare cuts and tax breaks for high earners with pithy words and snappy formulations.

According to Hensche, the claim that there is no alternative to the austerity measures laid down in the government's Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV programmes meant the "political class" was headed for "collective madness." Faced with rising unemployment, the call for a longer working day "came from the mad house," Hensche claimed. The weakening of protection against unfair dismissals and the undermining of legally binding wage agreements, justified as measures to create jobs and increase job security, were, he said, "evidence of galloping paranoia."

"How are insecure and unmotivated workers to identify with their work, a precondition for initiative and innovation?" Hensche asked. He added that every law student learned in his first year that a family should be protected against a father who steals the household income. But now, the disappearance of the "socially produced income through the roulette of the international stock exchanges" is called a "reform."

Hensche attempted to quote Goethe, according to whom nothing is more terrible than "active ignorance," and demanded a return to rationality. Much would already be gained if "economic rationality" returned and there was an end to the "bedevilment of economic narrow-mindedness." The "myth of no alternative," he declared, should not be accepted. It was merely the "perpetual drone of the political class."

Apart from the call for a "policy of reason" and an appeal for politics to follow the "principles of the European Enlightenment," Hensche's six-page speech contained no political answers or alternatives. Rather, he stressed the advantages of social security benefits for strengthening democracy and civil liberties, warned of the dangers of a social breakdown if the welfare state were destroyed, and concluded that the central demand of the new party should be the preservation of the welfare state.

"The major task of the welfare state is to create the conditions for the free development of the individual through a system of social and employment protection," he said. "Let us again affirm this dimension of liberty," he declared, to the applause of the delegates. Faced with the prevailing "perversion of post-liberalism," which defines liberty purely as a function of the free market, the defence of the welfare state is the most urgent task, he reiterated.

Hensche deliberately evades two questions with this line of argument. First, he does not examine why staunch supporters of "free market" policies have come to dominate all reformist parties in all countries (including the SPD, to which he belonged for 40 years). Although the mass protests against social cuts have run out of steam, he gives the impression that the welfare state can be preserved simply through a broad rank-and-file movement of protest and pressure. Second, he equates past social conquests with the welfare state and thereby excludes the basic question: Which class interests are served by this state?

Whoever claims today that it is possible to return to the policy of social reforms of the 1970s and the SPD of Willy Brandt—we leave aside the extent of the reforms that are being retrospectively glorified—is either politically naïve or a charlatan.

One has only to cast a glance at the factories to see how much the world, in general, and the world of work, in particular, have changed over the past three decades as a result of the globalisation of production. The wage-cutting blackmail of workers in the car plants and in many other enterprises is very real. Corporations are not only threatening to shift production to cheap-wage countries such as Poland, Ukraine or China, but are actually embarked on this course. This also applies to the high-wage jobs of technicians, engineers and software developers. The power of the international financial markets and large investors is a reality, and it determines decisions made by enterprises in various ways.

These objective changes in the world economy have undermined the post-war framework of labour protection and social measures. This has an enormous impact—in Germany, in particular. In hardly any other country—apart, perhaps, from Sweden—was the policy of social reconciliation and social partnership so pronounced and legally embedded as in Germany.

After fascism and world war, the ruling class in Germany felt itself forced to make social and political concessions in many areas. But these measures were possible only under the conditions of the post-war situation, when the country was rebuilt and production attained high growth rates, supported by American credit.

The globalisation of production, which international capital accelerated and intensified in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s, has not only brought about the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, including the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Soviet Union, which were based on national autarkic economic programmes, but has also undermined the "social market" economy.

This does not mean that social progress is impossible. Quite the opposite. The new forms of international communication, the increase in productivity, and the spread of industrial production throughout the world

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create the conditions for a humane society with a high degree of social equality. But this can be achieved only though the socialist transformation of society. As long as production is determined by the private ownership of the means of production and serves to enrich a small layer at the apogee of society, globalisation will be implemented mercilessly against the interests of working people.

In other words: only a socialist perspective that goes beyond the framework of the existing capitalist order and places the needs of the population higher than the profit interests of the corporations and banks can provide a viable, forward-looking orientation in the struggle against Hartz IV and Agenda 2010. A perspective based on the claim that the "social market economy" or so-called "Rhein capitalism" can be re-established is doomed to failure from the start.

This brings us to the second question. Hensche claims that "the welfare state is, first of all, a matter of freedom." This is false. Every state, even a democratic welfare state, always defends the existing conditions of property and rule. Regardless of its social aspects, the welfare state of the 1970s served to maintain the bourgeois order.

The German welfare state model can be traced back to Otto von Bismarck, who introduced social security some 100 years ago, not to build a free society, as Hensche would suggest, but rather to protect and stabilise the German empire and the rule of the rising bourgeoisie against a strong and socialist-oriented working class.

At that time, the Social Democrats, and, above all, Rosa Luxemburg, warned again and again not to rely on the state in the struggle for the social and political interests of the working class. Against the reformists of her day like Eduard Bernstein, Luxemburg stressed that social reforms were always a by-product of working-class struggle waged on the basis of a revolutionary perspective.

She was right. The reformists' perspective was limited to seeking gradual improvements within the bourgeois order—a perspective that not only prevents revolution, but also jeopardises any social conquests achieved by the working class.

Hensche's glorification of the state under the cover of "welfare-ism" is not a coincidence, but is rather bound up with his many years as a union official. Faced with increasing economic problems and social tensions, the trade unions everywhere cooperate ever more closely with governments and the state. In Brazil, this has taken the form of Lula da Silva, head of the Workers Party, which came out of the trade unions, defending Brazilian capitalism from the president's office. In Germany, essentially the same process takes the form of the unions offering the government support wherever they can. Hensche embodies a left-wing variant of this development.

In his 1940 essay, "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," Leon Trotsky uncovered the roots of this development. Monopoly capitalism is based not on private initiative and free competition, but on central command, he wrote. The unions therefore "confront a centralised capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power."

The conclusion he drew applies to today's situation: "In the eyes of the bureaucracy of the trade union movement the chief task lies in 'freeing' the state from the embrace of capitalism, in weakening its dependence on trusts, in pulling it over to their side. This position is in complete harmony with the social position of the labour aristocracy and the labour bureaucracy, who fight for a crumb in the share of super-profits of imperialist capitalism. The labour bureaucrats do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the 'democratic' state how reliable and indispensable they are in peacetime and especially in time of war."

Hensche tries his utmost to hide this subordination to the state, but it emerges in his speech again and again. Thus, he regards as a "further major task" the defence of the "constitutional guarantee of equality." Such a formulation is not new and has been repeatedly used in the past by left trade unionists and Stalinists.

Marxists fight to defend social and democratic gains, but they do so on the basis of a revolutionary perspective, seeking to educate the working class in the understanding that such gains can be defended only on the basis of a political struggle for socialism in opposition to the capitalist state and its various organs. Stalinists and left reformists, on the other hand, refer to the "constitutional guarantee of equality" to demonstrate their servility to the bourgeois state and its constitution. From their standpoint, defence of the constitution is equivalent to defence of the bourgeois order.

Hensche's reference to the constitution is entirely in line with this political line. It is meant to signal that, whatever it said about equality and social priorities, his party would regard itself as subordinate to and supportive of the bourgeois system and its state.

Hensche, who gained a doctorate in law, opened a legal practice in Berlin after relinquishing his chairmanship of IG Medien when that union was dissolved into the new umbrella union Ver.di. He knows very well that the letter of the law does not stand higher than social reality. No one in the political or media establishment is interested in what the constitution says about the "social restrictions on property." It is a relic of the post-war years, when even the Christian Democrats demanded the nationalisation of key industries.

The degree to which the political conceptions of the trade union bureaucracy dominate the WASG can also be seen in the person of Klaus Ernst, an IG Metall official from Schweinfurt, who was elected to the executive committee of the WASG. Ernst embodies the union demagogue, who likes to hear himself speak and seizes every opportunity to appear before the media.

Ernst opposed calling the WASG a new "left-wing party," and said he preferred that the organisation be designated a "welfare state party," since the defence of the welfare state was the common denominator upon which all members had to agree.

The WASG has so far avoided any serious programmatic discussion in favour of organisational growth. In Nuremberg, the party decided to "possibly" participate in next spring's state elections in North-Rhine Westphalia. The reason for this haste is easy to see. In a few weeks, at the beginning of January, the government's anti-welfare Hartz IV legislation comes into force, while taxes for the wealthy will again be lowered. It is to be expected that the number of protests and their size will again increase. The WASG fears a growing popular radicalisation, and is seeking to create a bureaucratic instrument to control and channel such a movement along politically safe lines.

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