Election in North Rhine-Westphalia

The implications of the SPD's decline

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The parliamentary election in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia on May 22 is of great political importance. With slightly less than 15 million voters, North-Rhine Westphalia is not only the most densely populated of the 16 German states; containing the Ruhr district, it also constitutes Germany's largest industrial center. While many of the coal mines and steel mills in the area were closed a long time ago, the area between the cities of Dortmund and Duisburg remains the most concentrated industrial region of the federal republic.

If the state's existing SPD (German Social Democratic Party)-Green Party government loses power—and at present, all polls point in such a direction—it would entail a major shift in political forces in the upper house of parliament, leaving the national government little room for maneuver. Such a development, following on the heels of the SPD's recent loss of its majority in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, would very likely seal the fate of the SPD-Green Party coalition on a national level at the next scheduled national elections in 2006. Six and a half years after coming to power, the government is now fighting for its survival.

For many German workers, casting a vote for the SPD was once bound up with the hope that an SPD government could, in one way or another, be influenced or pressured to represent the interests of working people. The experiences of recent years have made it clear that this is impossible.

The drastic social cuts imposed by the SPD-Green coalitions in Berlin and Düsseldorf have been met with strong popular resistance. As a result, the SPD has suffered heavy losses in one state election after another. But when election results are announced, it has become routine for the federal chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), or a speaker from the SPD executive committee to declare before the television cameras that the outcome will in no way affect the direction of government politics.

When hundreds of thousands took to the streets last year to protest against the social policies of the SPD-Green coalition, government spokesmen declared that they would not be swayed by "street protests." Even a continuous stream of resignations from the SPD failed to shift the orientation of the party leadership. Quite the opposite! A not insignificant layer within the party executive committee believe that the social cuts bound up with the so-called Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV laws could be implemented more easily if advocates of social justice and equality quit the party.

The SPD has broken completely with its grassroots and has thereby effectively excluded the large majority of the population from any role in political decision making. Elections have become an insignificant routine, bringing the same consequences irrespective of which party wins.

In no other German state was the relationship between the working class and the SPD so close and deeply woven as in North Rhine-Westphalia. "Whoever today is approaching the age of 60 between Rhine and Weser could vote when he wanted and for whom he wanted, but the result was always the same—social democracy governed the state," wrote the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (WAZ) some weeks ago.

For nearly four decades, the SPD held the post of prime minister in the state capital of Düsseldorf—12 years under Heinz Kühn; then 20 years of Johannes Rau, who later became federal president; then four years of Wolfgang Clement, who now occupies the post of economics and employment minister in the federal government; and since autumn 2002, Peer Steinbrück. "Where, if not here, is it possible for the SPD to draw up a balance sheet?" asked the WAZ, which has its own close links to the SPD.

The role of the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia during the post-war period began much earlier than when it first took over state government in 1966. Immediately following the end of the war, when coal and steel barons such as Krupp von Bohlen and Halbach were behind bars convicted as war criminals, workers organised the reconstruction of production and demonstrated calling for "the pits to be owned by the people!" In this "socialisation movement," as it was later called, the SPD concentrated its efforts on restricting the influence of communist works councils.

The SPD took advantage of the widespread revulsion over the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had established a brutal regime of suppression in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and 1930s and murdered an entire generation of Marxists in the Moscow Trials. The first postwar chairman of the SPD, Kurt Schumacher, designated Communists as "red-painted fascists" and exploited the activities of the Stalinists in the Soviet zone of occupation (SBZ), and later the GDR, for his propaganda.

Following the crushing by Soviet tanks of the workers' rebellion in East Berlin on June 17, 1953, and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Communist Party (KPD) was banned in the federal republic—thus securing the SPD a majority in the trade unions and works councils. Just as in the first half of the twentieth century, the SPD played a key role after the Second World War in maintaining and stabilising bourgeois rule in crisis situations. The reform programmes of the 1960s and 1970s had this as their primary aim.

This was especially clear in North Rhine-Westphalia. At the end of the 1950s, a third of the workforce was employed in the coal and steel industries. Three decades later, at the end of the 1980s, only 4 percent of workers in the region worked in these industries.

When domestic coal was replaced at the end of the 1950s by the cheaper raw material, oil, or by cheaper imported coal, the mining industry continued to lose its leading position in North Rhine-Westphalia. Between 1957 and 1967 alone, 51 out of a total of 141 pits were shut down, the workforce of over 300,000 cut in half and output reduced by around 20 percent.

In the middle of the 1960s, with public subsidies unable to secure output, the SPD—at the time still an opposition party—agitated for a "re-orientation of coal policy." In December 1964, SPD opposition leader Heinz Kühn proposed the setting up of a cross-party "common parliamentary coal group." Representatives of the large parties, the state government, the federal government, the trade unions and big-business enterprises jointly worked out models to implement the restructuring of

the industry. They pursued this policy in opposition to striking and protesting miners.

In the spring of 1966, the decisions made by the "common parliamentary coal group" led to violent conflicts with mine workers. Ninety percent of the workers voted to strike, but the trade union leaders called off any action before it had begun and agreed to a miserable compromise. Furious mineworkers responded by occupying not only the trade union center, but also the state parliament building. Under this pressure, the SPD took over the state government, pledging that through subsidies and "supplementary measures" no miner would be left destitute.

The "common parliamentary coal group" became the forerunner to the "concerted action," which was established by Federal Economic Affairs Minister Karl Schiller (SPD) after the formation of a so-called "Grand Coalition" of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD.

The institutionalised cooperation between entrepreneurs, the government, political parties and the trade unions continued with the establishment of Ruhr Coal (later Ruhr Coal AG and RAG) in the autumn of 1968. At that time, 25 coal operators were brought together in the new enterprise. With 52 mines and more than two-dozen coking plants it constituted over 80 percent of the German coal mining industry.

By energetically supporting new industrial projects, the social democratic government led by Kühn sought to keep the working population under control and within its sphere of influence. The opening of a new Opel auto plant on the site of a former pit in Bochum in 1962 was considered a shining example of this strategy.

At the same time, the SPD consciously sought to separate the working class from the student and youth protests that broke out at the end of the 1960s. As part of an international movement, students and young people took to the streets to protest against the miserable conditions at German universities, the Nazi past of federal Chancellor Kurt George Kiesinger, the Vietnam War and the invasion of Prague by Soviet tanks in 1968.

In September 1969, when steelworkers in Dortmund, Essen and Duisburg began strike action—against the will of its trade union—and won a significant wage increase, the state government was alarmed. It responded with a "Ruhr development programme" that envisaged a rapid and well-funded development of the education system aimed at diverting young people as quickly as possible from radical protest.

Under the direction of Johannes Rau, who since 1970 served as science minister in Kühn's cabinet, higher education facilities were established from August 1971 onwards in the cities of Siegen, Wuppertal, Münster, Hagen, Essen, Lemgo, Cologne, Dortmund, Aachen, Bielefeld, Bochum, Paderborn, Düsseldorf, Duisburg and Krefeld. One year later, universities were established in Duisburg, Essen, Paderborn, Wuppertal and Siegen. Today, there are 14 universities between Duisburg and Dortmund alone. In all of North Rhine-Westphalia there are 53.

In 1969, the SPD also won control of the national government. Willy Brandt (SPD) became chancellor of the "small coalition" comprising the SPD and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). One year later, Bavarian Prime Minister Franz Josef Strauss (Christian Social Union—CSU) tried to topple the Brandt government with a no-confidence vote. Workers in the Ruhr district played a key role in defending a government that they expected would improve their living and working conditions. They threatened to carry out a political general strike, the opposition backed down and workers celebrated the failure of the vote of no confidence as a political victory.

But appearances were deceptive. Against a backdrop of social concessions and radical phrases—"Dare to implement more democracy!"—the Brandt government increased the powers of the state. With the so-called "radical decree," banning left wingers from public employment, it suppressed all forms of socialist opposition. At the peak of ensuing social conflicts, Brandt then resigned and handed power over to Helmut Schmidt (SPD), who implemented a drastic cost-cutting programme with the support of the trade union bureaucracy.

With the intensification of the international economic crisis, attacks on workers have continuously increased. In this respect, the "century contract," negotiated in 1975 after prolonged struggles and aimed at easing the wind-down of the coal mining industry, was no exception. It was financed not by big business, but by the "energy tax on coal," a supplement to the electricity tariff to be paid by everyone.

The right-wing trajectory of the SPD and the political bankruptcy of the trade unions have deep objective causes. The globalisation of production, which enables international companies to scour the globe for the lowest wages, cheapest raw materials and best conditions for exploitation, have undermined the basis for national state welfare policies.

Anyone, therefore, who genuinely believes in the recent "critique of capitalism" made by SPD Chairman Franz Müntefering—and sees in it the possibility of a renewal of the SPD—is either a hopeless fool or political scoundrel. Müntefering's platitudes about the need for more social responsibility by business, and his comparison of international companies and fund managers with "plagues of locusts that have beset the country," serve only to mask the policies of the Schröder government.

Cynics in the SPD party executive committee have concluded that in the face of increasing popular resistance, it is advisable to develop a double strategy. While Müntefering calls for social responsibility, Chancellor Schröder announces further tax cuts for big business. With regard to this double strategy, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented recently, "It is undoubtedly strange how Franz Müntefering grumbles about locusts that are eating the country bare while Gerhard Schröder provides them with additional fodder."

The campaigns waged by former SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine and the so-called "Election Alternative" (WASG) serve the same purpose. Their claim that it is possible to return to the social reformism of the 1970s is misguided and politically reactionary. Such illusions serve to keep workers within the orbit of the SPD and divert them from a socialist orientation.

One only has to look at what is happening in the factories, such as Opel, to see that the transfer of production to other countries is not an empty threat, but is taking place continuously. It is used to play off one location and workforce against another. Big business pursues an international strategy while the SPD and trade unions, including their appendages such as the WASG, do everything to prevent an international strategy of the working class.

The most important task confronting the working class is to free itself from these nationally based bureaucracies. However, this entails more than just organisational measures such as party resignations. The working class must be politically reoriented, which requires a new political perspective. Not a single problem confronting workers in any part of the world can be resolved today within the national framework.

We—the Socialist Equality Party—decisively reject any efforts to revive the SPD and the programme of social democracy. The issue is not life-support measures for a political corpse, but a thorough analysis of the consequences of SPD-Green policies on a national and state level. Only such a political balance sheet and polemic over the programme and ideology of social democracy and the Greens can create the conditions for an independent movement of the working class.

The working class must counter the globalisation of production and the associated attacks on all social gains and democratic rights with its own conception of a new society, based not on egoism, profit and welfare cuts, but rather on solidarity and social progress. It must take up a political perspective that places the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business. This requires an international socialist programme and the building of a new revolutionary party.

Rarely in history has the contrast between the enormous social possibilities opened up by the development of technology and increased

productivity, and the destructive way in which this potential is abused, been so extreme as it is today. Instead of utilising modern technology for a rational development of society in the interests of all, the ruling elite exploits the private ownership of the means of production in order to enrich themselves and terrorise the rest of society.

Karl Marx's statement that private ownership of the means of production is incompatible with the social character of the productive forces is more relevant today than ever before. Only an international unification of workers on a socialist basis can bring global companies under social control.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky defended the Marxist programme of international socialism against the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist parties. The Left Opposition went on to found the Fourth International, with which the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) is affiliated today. The PSG was founded in 1997 and, like its predecessor the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (League of Socialist Workers), is the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes 15 years ago and now the political bankruptcy of the SPD represent a historical confirmation of the Trotskyist programme. They pose the necessity of the working class reorienting itself to the great socialist and democratic traditions of the workers' movement. The most important instrument for such a political and organisational rearming of the working class is the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), which is published in more than 10 languages by the International Committee of the Fourth International.