

Germany: powerful response to PSG election campaign

Our correspondents
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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG (Socialist Equality Party) in Germany is standing its own candidates in the upcoming national parliamentary elections in at least four states. While the major parties automatically qualify to stand for election, smaller parties like the PSG have to collect 2,000 signatures of support in each of the four states in order to qualify, with extremely short notice in this year's election.

Last week, teams started collecting signatures for the PSG in Berlin, Saxony, North Rhine Westphalia and Hesse. So far the results have been extremely positive—in total about 2,500 registered voters have already signed electoral forms. Many others, particularly foreign workers and young people below voting age, expressed their support and also would have signed if they had been eligible.

The PSG's perspective of building a new workers party on an international and socialist perspective is winning support in the context of a very public crisis of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition government. Many of those who signed wanted to discuss political questions. A common theme was the growing impoverishment of wide layers of society. Above all, many who spoke to teams at unemployment exchanges said they no longer knew how they could they could keep body and soul together.

For example, in Offenbach the widow of a Greek "Gastarbeiter" (immigrant worker with limited rights), who had worked in Germany for 38 years, told us she now has to live on €600 a month, but her regular minimum expenses amount to about €800 a month. "How am I supposed to manage?" she asked.

A woman who has to live on the new ALG-II [unemployment benefit rate] because of the new Hartz IV regulations, told us: "I am single and get €590 per month. That is supposed to cover everything—rent, electricity, telephone bills and everything else. Because I am actively seeking work, I have to constantly fill in and send off application forms, all of which costs money. I get a flat rate of €5 towards this from the Jobcentre—the rest I must pay for

myself. Despite my special "Frankfurt-Pass" [a means-tested entitlement to subsidised travel], the monthly travel card for public transport costs €41, which I can't afford."

A newly unemployed person, who must wait two weeks before getting any benefits, had no idea how he could buy nappies and food for his two children. He told us that the social services and other organisations like Caritas (the Catholic Charity that helps the poor) had told him they were not responsible to help in cases like his. He was disgusted at the bureaucratic responses and said it seemed the officials were more interested in paperwork than in people.

In Berlin, Sylvia Müller described the miserable conditions of vocational trainees. She is a trainee in the industry-wide institute for sales management, where young people can take a three-year course. She told us how she had found that all areas of life were subordinated to the profit interest: "In my vocational area, they no longer seek to guarantee a decent training, but are only interested in providing the cheapest training course possible, because the cheapest course will win the contract to provide the training. I no longer trust any of the established parties. There is no point in voting any more."

On the other hand, she agreed with the perspective of the PSG. "We have to unite internationally before we can achieve anything," she said. "We can't rely on the old bureaucratic parties any more. The young people are most important and we should turn to them."

Some of the unemployed and low-paid workers that we met responded to the rightward swing of the political establishment with resignation. Passers-by would often respond with a dismissive wave of the hand as soon as they heard the word "party." Politicians of every stripe are seen as being hopelessly out of touch with reality, as if they came from a different galaxy.

"The politicians don't spare a thought for the problems of ordinary people," said Robert Kohl, a 40-year-old unemployed man from Frankfurt. "It doesn't make any difference whether it's the SPD or the CDU [conservative opposition Christian Democratic Union], they have all

completely lost my confidence. They make sure they have plenty for themselves and for rich people, and they lower business taxes, but they show no interest in how the rest of us are supposed to get by.”

Many people expressed support for the PSG, because they had no more trust in the old parties and shared the view that an independent movement from below and a new party is urgently needed. For example, Jens Wittenbecher, a 26-year-old unemployed tiler from Berlin who signed together with his wife, explained, “We have given our support to the PSG because we believe that those on the receiving end of things have to organise themselves.”

Most people responded to the international socialist perspective of the PSG with remarkable receptiveness and openness. The rightward shift of the SPD and Green Party, social cuts and the destruction of jobs have obviously stirred up interest in a political alternative, particularly in view of world political and economic developments and the call for an early election.

The signature collection teams often had the feeling they were knocking on open doors. Nearly everyone who signed agreed with the logic that, because production is global, a global party must be built to take effective action against social cuts, job losses and the threat of war.

In particular, this perspective evoked a big response from young people. In North Rhine Westphalia many signatures were collected at music festivals. During a student demonstration against tuition fees on June 23 in Essen, 95 signatures were collected. At the Christopher Street Day in Bielefeld, 74 people signed.

The campaign of the new political grouping involving an alliance between the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative (WASG), led by the former SPD Chairman Oskar Lafontaine, met with a mixed response. Some signatories would only sign for the PSG when they were assured this in no way represented support for Lafontaine or PDS leader Gregor Gysi.

Outside the Jobcentre in Frankfurt, WWSWS correspondents met up with Mr. Herold and Ms. Schnitzler, a married couple with two small children. They started talking about the recent “Heuschrecken” or locusts campaign initiated by the SPD chairman, Franz Müntefering. (In this so-called campaign, the SPD leader criticised some of capitalism’s worst excesses, branding international capitalist firms as “locusts.”)

Mr. Herold said, “Now, of all people, just before the election, Müntefering claims that the SPD would raise taxes for the very rich. Now, for once he wants to see social justice done, after ignoring it for eight years. But it is too late now. It’s all 100 percent election propaganda—nothing more. They’ve just made it clear that they are ready to enter

into a grand coalition with the CDU. No one’s going to vote for the SPD any more. Every one saw at the last election, and sees in the polls that the SPD only have 25 percent of the votes.

A construction worker, Mr. Herold was employed at a reinforced-concrete structure works before he had to retire after a medical operation. “He has worn himself out from decades of hard work,” said Ms. Schnitzler, his wife. “Now he has been forced into early retirement. I am a housewife and mother of two children. Now we will have to see if anyone is prepared to help us out.”

Her husband, who as a site foreman worked for years for building firms and subcontractors acting for major construction companies like Bilfinger/Berger, Weiß & Freitag and Philipp Holzmann, explained how current EU policies set European construction workers against each other. He said: “In these construction companies, Polish and Czech workers are supplied through a subcontractor. They have to work day and night, Monday to Saturday, 10 or 12 hours a day for a pittance. I don’t begrudge these people their right to work, and they have to work really hard. I myself have also had to work away from home, and I know what it’s like. But it means workers’ wage rates and rights are destroyed, and that is no solution.”

“Schröder,” continued Mr. Herold, “came here to Frankfurt when Holzmann went bankrupt. He made all sorts of promises. Then he abandoned the workers like a hot potato. It was all a gigantic sham. Already a minister president of Lower Saxony, he had made hundreds of promises and never stuck to them. That man should never have been voted to be chancellor.”

“Of course the CDU is no better than the SPD,” interjected his wife, “we can see that already here in Hesse, where Roland Koch [the CDU minister president for the state of Hesse] has taken his turn in office and has brought the education system to the brink of destruction. And yet people still go out and vote! Well, I don’t see the point of voting anymore—except at least now I could give you lot my vote.”

Like most other people we asked, these families did not see Lafontaine and Gysi’s new “Party of the Left” as any alternative. “Lafontaine was himself an SPD politician for years,” said Mr. Herold, “There’s no way you can trust him.”



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