

2,000 signatures collected

Germany: PSG campaign finds a positive response in Hesse

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In the space of three weeks the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG (Socialist Equality Party) has collected 2,040 signatures in the German state of Hesse for its candidacy in the upcoming national election. Although the election has not yet been officially announced and the usual period of notice has been drastically shortened, the PSG is obliged to collect 2,000 official signatures of support before being allowed to take part in the elections under the name “Socialist Equality Party, Section of the Fourth International.” In addition to Hesse, the PSG is also currently collecting signatures in the states of Berlin, Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia.

The PSG is taking part in the elections to lay the foundations for a new party that—in contrast to all the other parties—uncompromisingly represents the interests of working people. The party’s election manifesto reads: “We oppose the cuts in social spending which are supported by all the parties represented in Germany’s parliament, the *Bundestag*, and stand on a fundamentally different principle: the needs of the population must take precedence over the profits of big business and the employers.” In its election manifesto the PSG stands for “the international unity of the working class across national borders and regardless of ethnic or religious differences,” and for the United Socialist States of Europe.

The electoral campaign team, who spoke to many people outside job centres, in town centres, train stations and university campuses, met with a very positive response. Especially outside job centres, people showed great interest in a party that was just as opposed to the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party ruling coalition, under Gerhard Schröder, as the conservative opposition Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), led by such figures as Angela Merkel, Roland Koch and Edmund Stoiber.

Many people expressed their bitter disappointment with the SPD. One man about 40 signed the PSG support form in Frankfurt-Rödelheim, one of the old working-class residential areas of the city. He had been a member of the SPD for 19 years, but had now left the party, he told us. His father, showing considerable courage, had “help to set up a local SPD group under Hitler.” And a young mother vented her anger over the SPD as follows: “Actually, I was always in the SPD, it’s our family tradition. But this time I really haven’t a clue who I should vote for.” She also gave us her signature.

A number of people expressed their distrust of the new “Left Party,” an electoral alliance between the Election Alternative (WASG) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The leading figures of both organisations have a long history behind them—Oskar Lafontaine was a longtime SPD politician and prime minister in the state of Saarland,

and Gregor Gysi is a representative of the PDS which emerged as the successor organisation to the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

In Hanau a woman aged about 50 gave this reply when asked outside the jobcentre what she thought of the “Left Party”: “I see it as just empty posturing. I knew straight away that nothing different can be expected from the likes of him [she was referring to Lafontaine].”

Only a short time before, Lafontaine had hit the headlines with his pronouncement that the state must “protect German families against foreign workers from the east.” This same woman gave the PSG her signature of support and especially welcomed the perspective of an international party because, as she said, there was no other way to stand up to the rich. She said that enterprises that operate globally and transfer their funds to the countries where taxes are lowest, while at the same time playing off workers from one country against another, must be combated internationally as well.

The resentments against politicians from all parties were palpable. “There is no way I am going to vote; they just do what they want anyway,” was heard time and again. “People feel that the politicians treat everything that the employers say as gospel,” said a working woman who followed up with: “Employees have absolutely no more rights and don’t get the slightest job protection.” She told us that she had been dismissed due to illness, and added, “I worked really hard and conscientiously for seven and a half years. Then I got sick and within ten days the letter of dismissal arrived. Because I was in hospital I missed the appeal date. Now I still feel ill all the time, even though I have been declared officially well. Here in the job centre I have been told that I must find a new job within three months. If you have no money, you have no rights; it’s sad but true.”

Another unemployed person, Anwar S., who had previously worked as a supervisor at the Rhine-Main US airbase, is also disabled and said he feels used and abandoned. As a sufferer from an asbestos-related disease who must soon have a further operation, he at least gets invalidity [disability] benefit, but he has to fight to get everything and is subject to downright harassment. He has to attend the job centre because otherwise he would get no child benefit for his son, who is a student. He has to provide minutely detailed proof of everything—not only his son’s study timetable, but proof even of the fact that he is his father. Previously he had an important job, “today I am treated like the dregs,” said Anwar. “I am sorry to say it, but all politicians are liars. Well, perhaps not all of them, but most of them.”

It became apparent that various layers of the working population were affected. Christina Z. told us in front of the job centre in

Frankfurt that up until three years ago she had a well-paid job with the Deutsche Bank. Since then she has only been able to find temporary work and sometimes no work at all.

She has already used up all her savings. "My standard of living has sunk, I haven't got anything left to spend." She was however not only concerned about her own situation, but also about that of the whole of society. "When I look around, I am amazed to see people are going hungry again. Families are especially affected and often don't know how they can find enough to eat for their children. My impression is that the combining of social security payments and unemployment benefits has made it worse for lots of people," said Christina. In fact, the new unemployment regulations ("Arbeitslosengeldes II") mean that unemployed people, who were previously able to claim benefits, no longer receive a penny if any family member still has an income.

Someone commented, "These are the conditions which prevailed in early capitalism," and gave his signature. He added, "Whoever has work, must now accept any conditions, including excessive working hours and less pay. Life is now just working and sleeping."

Many people told us that they were highly qualified in their professions, or had a great deal of vocational experience, but still could not find a job. Carola, a young art historian, who had just finished her final exams, gave us her signature of support. She told us she was very concerned because she had been looking for work for a long time without success.

She would be quite content to have a student job, she said. "I am used to living on a shoestring." But even these jobs are not to be found, because too many students are advised to find work during their studies. She told us: "It is an unbelievable waste of the years of learning we've had. We can't use what we've learned, because the only jobs going are those where profit can be made."

The theme of education and bringing up children concerned many people. Ilona, a young teacher, who looks after early morning pre-school groups for a primary school, told us: "I think it's a real disgrace that the number of teachers has been lowered. The groups are continually getting larger because there is a shortage of child-minders. Every day I notice the effect this has on the children, it does them no good at all; the younger ones especially need personal attention. Things have now got to the stage where it has a bad effect throughout the school day. You worry that the system will break down. Generally you see no more teachers being provided, and instead even more reductions in staffing."

The election promise of better schools, which brought the CDU to power in Hesse, hasn't been in any way fulfilled, she complained: "At that time they even said they would build more primary schools; instead of that they've been closing them down. A miserable disappointment. Based on my experience with children, I must say: it is a shocking situation. Everyone knows how important education is, but in practice it is turning into mass production. You have to process the most children with the least personnel. That's also really hard for the teachers. So much is expected from the teaching staff, that they are nearly at breaking point. And that will happen eventually!"

Many people gave accounts of despotic and bureaucratic practices in the job centre that bordered on bullying. Unemployed people who come under the Hartz IV regulations (new rules introduced by the SPD-Green Party that make it harder to claim unemployment benefits) often complained that they had not received the correct amount of benefit, or that their benefits had been arbitrarily cut off. In the job centre in Offenbach we met an older woman who had been forced to attend on behalf of her son's claim, because he was in hospital, and

would otherwise not get paid his money.

On the other hand, there were also a few examples of job centre workers who supported us, like the supervisor in Frankfurt, who took a copy of the PSG manifesto, read it through with great attention and then came over to sign and make a donation.

Over and over again the election team found spontaneous agreement with much of what they had to say. In some cases supporters revealed that they were readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and were really pleased to meet the party's election team. Two young unemployed women started talking to one another and then came over to us and told us that they had just found out they had both heard about the WWS. They each gave their signatures of support.

The word "Equality" in the name of the party also led to spontaneous approval. "The very name 'Socialist Equality Party' appealed to me straight away," said Philipp Hoffmann, an unemployed electrician. "Up until now there's never been such a party."

He took part in discussion held by the PSG and told us that he was currently living on 146 euros a month. "I got a reduction in my unemployment benefit payments because I went to sign on too late," said Philipp. "It is impossible to make ends meet with this amount. I eat lots of rice and pasta so I can feel a bit full. But I have to do without fruit and vegetables."

He was only too well acquainted with the prevailing propaganda. Everyone is supposed to have the chance of social improvement, if they make the effort and promote themselves. "But in the final analysis it is the top ten per cent that control everything," he said. "That's why that word 'equality' appealed to me so much, because it poses an alternative to all that."

The campaign to collect signatures in Hesse will continue to ensure a tally of support well over the required 2,000 signatures.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact