

Socialist Equality Party (Germany) holds election rally

“The most important cause of the disaster taking place in the US lies not in nature, but in politics and society”

Peter Schwarz
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On September 3 in Berlin the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), held its main election rally. The PSG is standing a total of eight candidates in the September 18 election, two apiece in four of Germany’s most populous states. We publish here the speech of Peter Schwarz, secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International and a member of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board. Tomorrow we will publish the speech by Julie Hyland, a central committee member of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain).

Most of you will have followed the recent events in the Southern US with a mixture of horror and astonishment. Horror over the scale of this natural catastrophe, the destruction caused, the suffering it has inflicted upon millions of people; and astonishment at the lack of preparation, the inaction of the government, over the way in which tens of thousands of those suffering and facing death were left to their fate for days.

The richest and most powerful nation in the world proved to be less prepared for a natural catastrophe than a country in the so-called “Third World,” even though the hurricane had been predicted for days and there had been warnings of the possible consequences for years. The government reacted with a breathtaking mixture of incompetence, indifference, brutality and arrogance. The scenes that have so far been witnessed on television are indescribable.

In New Orleans, over 100,000 were unable to follow the call for evacuation because they did not possess a car and the authorities provided no public means of transport; because they did not have money and could not afford a hotel room; or because they lacked any relatives elsewhere in the country with whom they could stay. Just imagine the situation: A large city is evacuated because a deadly disaster is approaching and the authorities simply leave the poor and those in need to fend for themselves!

Many have paid for this with their lives. No one yet knows how many have died. At first, there was talk of it being almost a hundred, then several hundreds, and now the figure is put in the thousands. And there seems to be no end to the deaths because of a lack of the most elementary aid and supplies. Whole families have wandered the streets for days without food and clean water. Others sit at the roadside, beside dead loved ones whose corpses they have not been able to bury.

While the authorities have proved unable and unwilling to protect lives, they have issued the order to the National Guard and police to shoot looters. In a televised speech, President Bush promised “zero tolerance.” Troops of the National Guard who have just returned from Baghdad are now patrolling New Orleans under instructions to “shoot to kill.” Meanwhile, most police officers have stopped carrying out rescue work in order to fight the looters. The protection of property has priority over saving human lives.

People are dying because they lack clean water and food or cannot tolerate the sweltering heat. Corpses lie everywhere. And the police and National Guard have nothing better to do than shoot people who, in their desperation, are taking vital supplies from flooded and abandoned business premises. The most frequently “looted” items are diapers for babies.

Devastating conditions exist in the New Orleans Superdome, used by the city as a refuge. According to estimates, up to 40,000 people sought protection there. As we meet, some 20,000 people are still there. Reporters have described conditions there as “hell on earth.” The most elementary supplies are lacking. The electricity has failed. There is neither light nor air conditioning. The stink of putrefying garbage and overflowing toilets is overpowering. There are also many dead in the overcrowded stadium. At least one man committed suicide by throwing himself from a balcony.

The stadium is being guarded by heavily armed police. Once they are inside people are not allowed out again. Many complain that it is worse than being in prison; they are treated like animals, with looting cited as the reason. In the surrounding luxury hotels, conditions are relatively bearable. While the poor fight for their lives, the rich can still dine from first-class menus, as a local newspaper reported.

The most important cause of the disaster taking place in the US lies not in nature, but in politics and society.

I do not want to deal here with the issue of global warming—how CO2 emissions and other environmental damage have contributed to the emergence of such a devastating hurricane like Katrina. That is an important question, but it involves processes taking place over years and decades. If, for the sake of argument, we assume that Katrina was a purely natural phenomenon, and was, in this sense, inevitable, why were the preparations so poor? And why did the victims receive so little help?

It was well known that the levees that protect New Orleans—an urban area with a million inhabitants—against inundation could not withstand a hurricane of this strength. It was also well known that such a hurricane would hit the city eventually. The authorities had prepared plans for reinforcing the levees, but there was no cash to carry out the work. There were even computer simulations about the effects of such a disaster, which have now been proved rather exact. At 100,000, even the number of people who would be unable to leave the city in the case of an evacuation had been predicted. But there were no emergency plans or preparation for when such a disaster actually occurred.

And finally, after the disaster had struck, an enormous national effort would have been necessary to evacuate the stricken area and help the victims, to avoid further deaths and finance the reconstruction. But no such thing has occurred.

President Bush made it clear that little support and money can be expected from the federal government, which spends \$6 billion each month on the war in Iraq. He only abandoned his five-week vacation after the disaster had raged for three days and visited the affected area for the first time five days later.

German television described how this was arranged: 12 hours before Bush's arrival, bulldozers came and cleared up the area, so that the president, accompanied by the press corps, had a good-looking backdrop. The reporter said she was shocked by the hurricane's destructiveness, but she was just as shocked by the way in which the president's visit was staged.

Hurricane Katrina has revealed the final stage of a process of social decay that has been unfolding for a quarter of a century. The disaster in the American South is the result of a policy of subordinating every social function to the naked profit interests of a small minority. In the name of "personal responsibility" and the "free market," public facilities have been privatised, investment in infrastructure and social provisions axed.

The lives and security of the American people have been sacrificed to the predatory aims of American imperialism. Thus, the budget of the Army Corps of Engineers for flood control operations in New Orleans was cut by around half in the last year. And a great part of the materiel now urgently required in the US is being deployed in Iraq.

The main lesson from this disaster is that the elementary needs of a mass society cannot be reconciled with a social system that subordinates every aspect of social and economic life to the enrichment of the owners of capital. The hurricane has revealed a country torn apart by deep class contradictions, in which the lives of millions of poor people are not worth a cent and where the government is headed by a corrupt, egoistic plutocracy that eschews any social responsibility. The myth of a great and wealthy America has suffered a serious blow.

What does this disaster in the US have to do with the Bundestag (parliamentary) elections here in Germany? Quite a lot in fact! Leading politicians from the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the opposition Christian Democratic Union (CDU) explain repeatedly that the elections on September 18 offer a "choice of direction." That is correct. The problem is, only one direction is on offer from those parties; and this points towards New Orleans.

All those parties at present in the Bundestag—the SPD, the Greens, the CDU, the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP)—advocate political programmes advocating the very same measures that have led to the disaster in New Orleans. The same also applies to the Left Party of Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, as I will show.

The establishment parties' response to unemployment and social decay reads: More market solutions, more personal responsibility, reduce the welfare state, privatise public provision—education, health and old-age support. The clearer it is that social problems require a social solution, the more openly they reject any social responsibility.

The only areas where they advocate strengthening the functions of the state are—as in the US—homeland security and the military. The police, the secret services and the armed forces face no cuts. Instead, there is an enormous increase in the means with which they will be able to strike down future opposition from the general population. This development can lead only to a social disaster, as we are presently experiencing in New Orleans.

When President Köhler dissolved the Bundestag, he justified this by claiming that now voters could have their say. This was democratic, he alleged. In reality, voters have no choice at all—except whether the same policies are carried out by a Chancellor Schröder (SPD) or a Chancellor Merkel (CDU), by a small or grand coalition of the various parties.

The undemocratic character of this election becomes clear when you consider how the most unusual step of prematurely dissolving the

Bundestag came about.

It is beyond doubt that the overwhelming majority of the population reject the social and economic policies of the present government. That was expressed in last spring's mass demonstrations against the "Agenda 2010" austerity programme, which were attended by twice as many as the union organisers had anticipated. It was also expressed in the spontaneous demonstrations against the "Hartz IV" labour reforms. And it expressed itself in the SPD's massive loss of votes in 11 consecutive state elections.

Schröder reacted to the most recent and most devastating of these defeats—the SPD's loss of its government majority in North Rhine-Westphalia after 39 years—by announcing a premature general election. One press comment compared this to being driven to "commit suicide by fear of dying." Schröder clearly showed that he will not deviate from his hated course—neither under the pressure of the electorate nor under the pressure of his own party. He would rather transfer government power to the CDU/CSU and FDP.

Ever since, the most important SPD election message has been that it will steadfastly stick to its Agenda 2010. The SPD campaign is centred completely on Schröder. Its slogan is "remain steadfast"—steadfast against SPD members and voters. With the premature election, Schröder has posed the electorate an ultimatum: Either you accept Agenda 2010 with everything that entails, or you get a government led by the CDU that will push the same program through even more harshly.

Schröder justified the premature dissolution of the Bundestag saying he no longer enjoyed a constant and reliable base for his policies. In other words, he feared that his own deputies might bend under pressure from the rank and file. The Federal Constitutional Court rubber-stamped this constitutionally dubious procedure, thereby substantially expanding the legal authority of the chancellor.

By making the question whether the chancellor still enjoys the confidence of parliament one decided at his own personal discretion, the court has given the chancellor the practical means of dissolving parliament when he wishes. He has thus been handed an effective lever to discipline parliament and intimidate fractious deputies. According to Heribert Prantl in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, this court's judgement has given "the constitutional benediction to an autocratic style of government."

Imagine that the same court had had to decide upon a premature dissolution of parliament under conditions where the government could have fallen to a left-wing majority resting upon a broad movement of the masses. In this case, the court would surely have reached the opposite judgement.

The thoughtless and cynical attitude displayed by the ruling elite regarding its own legal norms is an international phenomenon. In the interests of short-term political aims—which often emanate directly from the boardrooms of the most powerful companies—it throws overboard legal principles that for a long time were considered the basis of the stability of the bourgeois order. The ruling elite has decided to subordinate its own legal principles to protect its power. Once the prevailing legal norms are blown apart, authoritarian forms of rule develop according to their own dynamic.

The paradox of the present situation is that public opinion stands far to the left of all the establishment political parties. But the result of this contradiction is not a political shift to the left, but a development to the right. This is also an international phenomenon.

In France, the conservative UMP of President Chirac has an enormous parliamentary majority, which bears no relation to its actual support in the population. In the US, an ultra-right clique determines policy. It has placed the political cipher George W. Bush at its head and rests upon a narrow base of the religious right. In Britain, the Blair government is deeply hated, but still enjoys a secure majority.

The reason for this lies in the utter bankruptcy of the social reformist

parties, which in the past were supported by the majority of the working class or were at least elected by them—from the SPD in Germany, the Socialist and Communist parties in France, the Labour Party in Britain and also, to a certain degree, the Democrats in the US: Under conditions of globalization and an intensified international crisis of capitalism, these parties are no longer in a position to cushion class contradictions through social reforms. Without exception, they have all gone over to the defence of capitalism at the expense of their past reforms.

The SPD-Green Party coalition has undoubtedly implemented attacks against working people in the last seven years that a Christian Democratic government would have found impossible without unleashing greater conflicts.

An unintended compliment in this regard was recently made by the *Economist* magazine. It agreed that German wage costs—a crucial yardstick for competitiveness—had fallen strongly in recent years compared to France, Italy, Holland and Great Britain. The *Economist* cited the readiness of the German trade unions to accept lower wages, longer working hours and more flexible conditions of work. It is no wonder therefore that profits and share values of many of Germany's main companies and banks have risen strongly.

However, the possibilities for the SPD and the unions to keep the working class under control have been somewhat exhausted. This is why they are ready to once again hand over power to the Christian Democrats, who are preparing for a new round of attacks against the working class with CDU leader Merkel's health reforms and the flat tax proposed by her newly appointed finance expert Paul Kirchhof.

In the history of the SPD, there is a long tradition of handing power over to the right wing when it cannot withstand the pressure from below. A difference between the so-called left-wing and right-wing bourgeois parties is that the former throw in the towel as soon as they come under pressure, while the latter cling on stubbornly even if they are in an apparently hopeless crisis.

The experience of the American right confirms this. The stubbornness and criminal energy with which it launched the impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton, the theft of the 2000 presidential elections and the illegal Iraq war astonished many of its opponents. There is always a danger that one underestimates the right's unscrupulousness and ruthlessness.

In this regard, it is worthwhile reviewing the actions of the SPD during the greatest disaster of German history—the seizure of power by the Nazis under Adolf Hitler.

In 1930, Hermann Mueller, the last social democratic chancellor of the Weimar Republic, surrendered power to the Catholic Centre Party politician Heinrich Brüning, supporting his emergency measures directed against the working class. In the summer of 1932, the SPD capitulated without a fight when the von Papen government displaced the SPD's last bastion in a coup, taking over the government in the state of Prussia. At that time, Prussia comprised about two thirds of the German population.

Although the SPD possessed its own armed militia (the Reichsbanner) and the working class parties of the SPD and KPD (Communist Party) together possessed more parliamentary deputies than the Nazis, the SPD finally accepted the appointment of Hitler as chancellor without a fight. In a speech to trade unionists in Stuttgart, Kurt Schumacher, at that time a prominent Reichsbanner representative, said they could rely on the constitution, President Hindenburg and the barons and industrialists in Hitler's cabinet.

Until the day the constitution was openly breached, there should be no extra-parliamentary fight, he said. "This defence comes into being the moment when the others abandon the terrain of the law and the constitution, and steal the final rights in a coup and an entire people rise against it." This moment had not yet come, Schumacher continued. Hitler was merely a "piece of window dressing" in a government that was firmly

in the hands of the classical right wing. "Seven barons and industrialists stand against three brown dilettantes in the cabinet. The army is commanded by a general trusted by Hindenburg, the Prussian police have von Papen, the youth and the workers have Seldte's Stahlhelm (Steel Helmets)," said Schumacher.

Six months later, Schumacher sat in a concentration camp; the KPD, SPD and Reichsbanner had been smashed. It was now too late for a fight.

But the capitulation by the Social Democrats had still not reached its end. In 1932, some trade union leaders had already resigned from the SPD, and on May 1, 1933, the ADGB, the predecessor of today's German Union Alliance (DGB), officially called for participation in May Day celebrations under the swastika flag.

In Baden-Württemberg, the SPD even voluntarily dissolved itself. The regional leadership recommended the party resign all its political offices in the municipalities and in the state legislature, and that teachers and civil servants who were SPD members should resign, calling upon them to exercise "their duties in a manner that permits no doubt about their national convictions nor their good will towards the new political formation of Germany according to the plans of the national revolution."

This history, and the seven years of the SPD-Green party coalition, clearly show that the most urgent political task today consists of constructing a new party that defends the interests of working people, including pensioners, the unemployed and young people. It cannot be the task of such a party to reanimate the reformist programme of social democracy, which has so obviously suffered a shipwreck. This is our most important difference with the Left Party of Lafontaine and Gysi, who claim they can breathe new life into the bankrupt programme of the SPD.

As we explain in our election programme, "In these elections, the working class is confronted not only with the bankruptcy of the SPD-Green Party government, but with a historical crisis of the capitalist system." The nub of this crisis is that modern mass society, in which millions of individuals are linked by an international division of labour and depend upon each other, cannot be reconciled with the anachronistic principle of the private ownership of the means of production and the national borders upon which capitalism is based.

At every turn, the pursuit of profits by the international financial institutions and companies comes into conflict with the most fundamental social needs of mankind—as became so clearly visible in New Orleans. Social inequality has reached an historically unparalleled magnitude. Five hundred and fifty billionaires possess the same amount of wealth as the poorest 2 billion people on the planet. A top American manager earns 500 times more than a worker in his company.

The struggle for raw materials, markets and strategic influence is unleashing new imperialist wars—as in Iraq, which was a war for oil. The American government has decided to re-divide the globe and establish a world order in the interests of US imperialism, based upon the worst forms of capitalist plunder and exploitation.

This can only be stopped by a broad political mass movement of working people. It requires a programme that is both socialist and international. Today, it is impossible to improve the social position of working people or to stop the continuous welfare cuts without curtailing the private ownership of the means of production. A socialist government would always place the needs of the population higher than the profit interests of the entrepreneurs and employers' associations and on this basis would reorganise economic life anew.

Not a single problem that confronts workers today, here or in any other country, can be solved within the national framework. Against the large transnational corporations and financial institutions, which play off one location against another and which mutually extort their workforces, there is only one possibility of defence: Workers must develop their own international strategy that is based on solidarity and cooperation.

In Europe, this means the fight for a United Socialist States of Europe.

The European Union is unable to overcome the national and social divisions of the continent. It is a tool of the most powerful employers' associations for social cuts. Unemployment, poverty and social inequality go hand in hand with the destruction of democratic rights and the systematic increase in military armaments. Europe can only be united and developed for the benefit of all on a socialist basis.

The Socialist Equality Party is taking part in the Bundestag elections in order to put before the working class the basis for the construction of a new socialist mass party. As the German section of the International Committee the Fourth International, the PSG embodies the tradition of the Trotskyist world movement, which for many decades defended Marxism against social democracy and Stalinism.

We are resolute political opponents of the Left Party. This party resulted from a union of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative (WASG). It is not the result of a leftward development of the working class, but is a direct attempt to prevent such a thing.

Both the PDS, the successor to the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany, and the WASG, whose leadership was recruited from among longstanding SPD and union functionaries, look back upon a long tradition of suppressing all independent movement of the working class. With the establishment of the Left Party, they are trying to repeat this under conditions in which the SPD is in a deep crisis.

The leaders of the Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, criticise many social and political evils. This is why the party has found a certain resonance, which is reflected in relatively high opinion poll findings. But they never tell their voters what would be necessary to carry out their demands. The term socialism does not even appear in their election programme. Instead, the Left Party spreads the illusion that pressure on the SPD and CDU could stop the social and political attacks on the working class. Their programme is purely national in its orientation. It calls for a return to Keynesian policies of economic control within the national framework.

Such an orientation can only paralyse and stupefy the working class, and disarm it in the face of the coming dangers. It leads inevitably to new disappointments, from which ultra-right forces can profit. Moreover, it is transparent and cynical. After all, here in Berlin and in the state of Mecklenburg-Pomerania the PDS has sat in the state government for a long time together with the SPD. And the SPD-PDS-led Berlin state legislature is the frontrunner when it comes to attacks on jobs and wages in the public sector, reductions in childcare provisions and cuts in many other areas upon which the daily life of the population depends.

Above all, active in the Left Party are radical groups calling themselves socialist and revolutionary—the Linksruck and SAV groups—which claim the Left Party will move further to the left. It is developing its own dynamic which should be supported and promoted, they argue. But this is a sham. The working class cannot achieve socialism blindfolded. The most important task of a socialist party consists in preparing the working class for inevitable class battles. It must call things by their names, and oppose all illusions that the attacks on social and democratic rights can be stopped through pressure on the SPD or other bourgeois parties.

Being determines consciousness, Marx once wrote. The working class throughout the world is passing through crucial political experiences. The consequences of the hurricane disaster in the US—on top of the horrors of the Iraq war—have opened many people's eyes to the reactionary nature of capitalist society. Our task consists of the education of working people to consciously examine these experiences, generalize from them and draw the appropriate political conclusions. We rest upon the strategic lessons of the twentieth century—from the successes and defeats of the workers' movement—and make them the basis for the coming social and political struggle.

With the *World Socialist Web Site*, which enjoys a large daily readership in many countries in the world, we have an outstanding instrument at our

disposal. I am confident that its influence will enormously increase in the coming period and call upon everyone here to participate in this challenging and rewarding work.



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