

Lively discussion at German Socialist Equality Party election meeting

Our reporters
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On September 3, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG (Socialist Equality Party of Germany) held its main election meeting in Berlin. Workers, students and young people from across Germany and from a number of other European countries took part.

The PSG is intervening in the September 18 national elections to advance a socialist and internationalist alternative to the parties representing Germany's ruling elite. The autumn elections were called a year early by the SPD chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, who currently heads a coalition government of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens. He issued his call for new elections following the disastrous result for his party in key state elections held earlier this year. The slump in support for the SPD in a state which is a traditional stronghold for German social democracy was a clear indication of the extent of popular opposition to his policy of social cuts.

Schröder's manoeuvre for premature elections took the form of an ultimatum to the German people—either vote for my government and all of its deeply unpopular measures aimed at dismantling the German welfare state, or accept a victory by Germany's conservative union opposition (Christian Democratic Union, CDU—Christian Social Union, CSU), which has supported all of the reactionary SPD-Green Party legislation but at the same time says it does not go far enough.

The PSG is standing candidates in a total of four German states (Saxony, Berlin, North-Rhine Westphalia and Hessian), which are among the most populous and are important centres of industrial and political activity.

The meeting was opened by Elisabeth Zimmermann, a PSG candidate in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia. She presented a balance sheet of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD)—Green Party government: a record characterised by growing militarism and unparalleled attacks on the past social gains of the working class.

Zimmermann emphasised that the aim of the PSG's participation in the elections was to establish an independent movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. For this reason the PSG was sharply opposed to the policies of the recently formed Left Party and its leader Oskar Lafontaine, who claims that it is possible to pressure the SPD, and even the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), to moderate their policies and return to the type of politics based of social consensus that characterised German politics in the 1960s.

The first speaker was Peter Schwarz, a member of the executive committee of the PSG and a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. He began his contribution by addressing the consequences of the hurricane catastrophe in the US.

The reaction of the American authorities to the devastating situation for hundreds of thousands of affected people in the Southern states of the US spoke volumes about how the US government regards the poor and weak. The roots of the catastrophe are first and foremost political rather than natural. In the most graphic fashion, what was being shown in the US was the complete incapacity of capitalism to reconcile the most basic needs of the population with the profit interests of the ruling elite.

Schwarz then drew attention to the upcoming federal elections in Germany and pointed out the central dilemma of the election: the fact that only one political direction was being proposed by all the main parties, and that these policies pointed towards New Orleans. All of Germany's bourgeois parties reject any responsibility for the basic social requirements of the population.

In fact, funding has been increased for the police and the army in Germany as a precaution to combat popular unrest. The people had no real choice, Schwarz said, but instead have been confronted with an ultimatum by Chancellor Schröder: either the continuation of the deeply unpopular policies of his SPD or even more drastic attacks by a government formed by the conservative opposition.

The recent decision by Germany's constitutional court to legitimise this ultimatum, in the form of an early election, indicates the determination of the ruling elite to sacrifice traditional forms of bourgeois democracy in the interests of defending the most basic interests of a ruling elite that finds itself in an ever deepening economic and political crisis—an international phenomenon. The German ruling classes have reacted to the deepening social divide and a move to the left amongst broad layers of the population with a sharp shift to the right.

Under conditions where the SPD is losing its influence amongst workers and lacks the capacity to continue its attacks on the past social gains of the working class, it is preparing to hand over power to the right wing. Such a development has a long tradition in Germany. In the period of the Weimar Republic, it was the SPD which handed power to Chancellor Brüning and then capitulated to Hitler's dictatorship.

The most urgent task of the working class today is therefore the construction of its own political party. Social reformism has failed

and cannot be revived. Social inequality has grown in leaps and bounds and the crisis of capitalism is increasingly taking the form of new wars. This process can be halted only by an offensive by working people on the basis of an international socialist program that subordinates the profit interests of a small elite to the needs of the population as a whole.

The Left Party of Oskar Lafontaine entirely rejects the development of such a movement. It attempts instead to revive social reformism and deliberately mislead workers over the real dangers they confront.

Julie Hyland, a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain and a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board, reported on the political situation in England following the terror attacks in London this past July. Even before Britain's participation in the Iraq war, participants at the massive antiwar protests had already made clear that Blair's support for the US war and the subsequent destabilisation of the Middle East would only serve to increase the danger of terror attacks taking place in Britain. But Prime Minister Tony Blair had arrogantly ignored such warnings. His interpretation of democracy is that the government has to hold its ground at all costs when faced with broad popular opposition.

The reaction of the Blair government to the terror attacks in London consisted of establishing an atmosphere of fear and shock, suggesting that anyone who draws a link between the bombings and the Iraq war is guilty of aiding and abetting the terrorists, and potentially subject to criminal sanctions. Hyland dealt in some detail with the murder of Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes, which made clear that police death squads were now operative on British streets.

There then followed a lively discussion over the social situation and international relations, with many of the younger members of the audience in particular asking questions. A number of questions referred to the policies of the British ruling class, the killing of de Menezes and the subordination of the British government to the US.

Hyland explained that British capitalism has gone through an enormous process of decline during the past 40 to 50 years. It now sees no possibility of being able to independently defend its own interests and is attempting to balance itself between Europe and the US.

German reunification and the growing influence of Germany served to further undermine the position of Britain. This is why Blair is seeking to keep Europe weak and play off one country against another. Blair saw the Iraq war and an accompanying re-division of the world as an opportunity for Britain to grab a piece of the booty.

In answer to a question of how it was possible to eliminate social inequality, it was pointed out that throughout its history the working class has always had social equality as its aim. This history had to be studied. It was necessary to prepare for future struggles and be able to intervene with a socialist program.

When asked why the German people were so passive and always voted in favour of the same anti-social policies, Peter Schwarz answered that this had to be understood in terms of the history of the working class. The problem is not the so-called passivity of the

population, but rather the failure and betrayal of social democracy and Stalinism.

A majority voted for an SPD-Green government in 1998 in order to get rid of conservative chancellor Helmut Kohl. In 2002, the SPD-Green coalition was once again voted into power because Schröder had publicly spoken out against the Iraq war.

It is incorrect to maintain that the working class is passive. The real issue was that workers lacked a political organisation which defended their historical interests, understood fundamental issues and explained and analysed them for the benefit of the working class. Today workers are going through enormous experiences but feel unable to intervene positively because they lack any substantial organisation which represents their interests—and this includes the trade unions.

As an example, Schwarz referred to the strike at Northwest Airlines in the US, where staff were opposing huge wage cuts and the destruction of jobs. All of the other unions at the airline have worked to stab the striking workers in the back and organise scabbing. Workers are making the experience that their traditional leaderships not only refuse to support them but are actively siding with management and the big concerns to crush workers' resistance. The issue of a new independent socialist leadership for the working class was posed more directly than ever before. To provide working people in Germany and all over the world a clear analysis of the issues involved, to enable workers to develop their own independent standpoint and articulate a revolutionary socialist response, is at the heart of the election campaign of the PSG and the work of the WSWs web site.

Further questions took up the standpoint of other organisations which call themselves socialist as well as PSG policy on health issues, pensions, patient care and the problems of the disabled, with reference to the priorities of a workers' government.

The responses emphasised that the PSG defends an international socialist perspective which, in opposition to Stalinist organisations, bases itself on the global character of modern production and economy. The enormous increase in productivity through the introduction of modern technology is fundamentally progressive. These gains would be used by a workers government by placing the key areas of the economy, the big banks and concerns under the democratic control of the vast majority of the population. Higher taxes would be imposed on high incomes and property and hundreds of thousands of jobs created in socially vital areas such as health care, education and teaching.



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