

Support the Socialist Equality Party campaign for the Berlin Senate

Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit)
28 June 2006

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) is standing its own candidates in the September state elections in Berlin. Our goal is to provide a clear voice and a revolutionary socialist orientation to the widespread opposition that exists to the anti-social policies of the Berlin state government, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism.

Our participation is a step toward the construction of an international party that opposes war, defends democratic rights, and fights for social equality and the eradication of poverty.

We reject the endlessly repeated claim that “the coffers are empty”—the standard formulation employed by the rich and super-rich to push through new social cuts and impose poverty on the mass of the population.

The tax breaks implemented by the last federal government have effected a gigantic redistribution of wealth from those at the bottom of society to those at the top. Many millionaires and large-scale enterprises now boast that they have drastically reduced their tax payments, or pay nothing at all.

In 2001, so-called tax reforms resulted in a revenue loss of €1.8 billion to the Berlin state treasury, yet that same year the state legislature provided €1.75 billion to bail out the scandal-ridden Berlin Bankgesellschaft. Since then, as part of a new “risk control law,” some €300 million is being made available every year to the bank, so as to underwrite the financial assets of Berlin’s elite.

We have only contempt for the claims of Mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD) and his economics minister, Harald Wolf (Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism), that there is no alternative to this policy. Under the so-called “red-red” coalition, the Berlin state legislature likes to talk about “social innovation,” while it serves the interests of big finance on every concrete question, and acts as a lackey of an arrogant financial elite. It will go down in history as the most cowardly and incompetent administration the city has ever seen.

The Socialist Equality Party is seeking to put an end to this orgy of self-enrichment. Our aim is not to beg for alms or reform capitalism, but to replace it with a socialist system in which the economy serves the needs of working people, rather than the profit interests of a financial oligarchy and the greed of corporate bosses.

If we are elected to the Berlin state legislature, we will fight for a programme that sets out to eliminate poverty and all forms of social misery. We call for:

- The re-introduction of business taxes that have been abolished; the taxation of large private fortunes; the immediate cancellation of the bailout of the Bankgesellschaft Berlin (BGB). All financial promises made to benefit the BGB must be declared null and void, while the savings of small depositors are protected.

- The initiation of a programme of public works in road construction and the renovation of schools; the employment of additional teaching staff; the re-opening of swimming pools, sports and leisure facilities, libraries, etc., that have been closed. All cuts in wages and social

conditions for public service employees must be restored.

- The abolition of all secret government activities and confidentially rules; the integration of the general population into political decision-making; the establishment of citizens’ committees to develop proposals for resolving the problems in various city districts and at other levels of the administration. Only in this way can the population intervene actively in politics and oppose the profit interests of big business.

The argument that such policies would lead to factory closures and yet more unemployment does not frighten us. We know that these policies cannot be completed within one city or within the boundaries of one state. But they must be initiated! And they must be linked to the political mobilisation of the working class across Europe and internationally.

Today, workers around the world confront the same problems and can resolve them only on an international level. The globalisation of production has undermined all attempts to improve workers’ living conditions on a purely national basis. Workers require an international perspective to defend their most elementary rights.

A serious socialist initiative in the Berlin state legislature that boldly opposed the employers’ organisations and lobbyists, that called things by their real name and sought to mobilise the population for fundamental social change would produce a very different outcome than that produced by the cowardly laments about unavoidable social cuts uttered by people who call themselves left-wing, but who in every case act as the cat’s paw of the right.

Such a socialist initiative would send a powerful signal. Millions of workers, young people, students, pensioners, people from all social layers in Europe and worldwide are looking for a political way forward. The propaganda about the German “social market economy” is being disproved daily by the news flowing from company boardrooms. No one still believes the talk of “blossoming landscapes,” as promised when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, especially those in the former East Germany.

All the unresolved problems that led in the previous century to fascist terror and world wars have resurfaced. With mass unemployment and increasing social desperation, the political rotteness of capitalist society takes on the form of right-wing extremist tendencies, on the one hand, and police state repression, on the other.

Our participation in the election seeks to link up with the revolutionary socialist traditions of the working class.

Like no other city, Berlin has historically been the focus of the socialist workers’ movement. In 1867, the pioneers of revolutionary socialism August Bebel and William Liebknecht were the first Social Democrats to enter parliament in the German capital of Berlin. It was in this city that the world’s first Marxist mass party developed, the SPD.

It was also here that the SPD committed its historic betrayal, when in 1914 it agreed to the Kaiser’s war credits and supported the First World War. In 1918, the city was at the centre of the November revolution, but social democracy prepared the murder of revolutionary leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg at the hands of the *Frei Korps*, the

precursor to Hitler's Brownshirts. It was here in 1933 that the workers' movement experienced its greatest defeat, when the SPD and the Stalinist German Communist Party capitulated without a fight to Hitler's fascist hordes.

After Hitlerite fascism and another world war, Berlin became the front line in the Cold War. The city was divided by the infamous Berlin Wall.

Here, in 1953, building workers marched from East Berlin's Stalinallee to the Brandenburg Gate and called on West German workers to join them in a general strike. On both sides of the Wall, the ruling elites rested on the greatest lie of the twentieth century—the identification of Stalinist dictatorship with socialism. In the autumn of 1989, when millions demonstrated in East Berlin and brought down the Stalinist regime, political demagoguery reached a new pinnacle. The fall of Stalinism was used, in the name of liberty and democracy, to introduce a capitalist market economy.

Today, 17 years later, this propaganda has been thoroughly exposed and discredited. Mass unemployment, increasing poverty and want, and the constant assertion that there is no alternative to this social catastrophe amount to a devastating indictment of the capitalist system.

It is necessary to draw a political balance sheet and articulate some fundamental truths.

What differentiates the Socialist Equality Party from the SPD, the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism and the Election Alternative (WASG)?

The interests of the vast majority of the population cannot be reconciled with a social order based on the private ownership of the means of production and the nation state. The social crisis cannot be overcome within the framework of the existing capitalist system.

Demonstrations and "pressure from below" alone cannot put a stop to the attacks on social and democratic rights. What is needed is a political movement of working people that is completely independent of the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions, and that fights for the re-organisation of society on a socialist basis.

On this basic question, the Socialist Equality Party differs fundamentally from all other parties that are standing in this election.

For decades, many workers in West Germany and West Berlin voted for the SPD—not because the SPD stands for a socialist society, but because the party promised to improve social conditions through reforms within the framework of capitalism. Such a perspective has proven completely illusory. After seven years of an SPD-Green Party federal government, nobody can seriously claim that the SPD is capable of genuine social reforms.

In 1998, many had hoped that the incoming SPD-Green Party government would put an end to the years of welfare cuts under the conservative government of Helmut Kohl. Instead, the opposite took place.

The seven years of the Schröder government witnessed the biggest-ever redistribution of income from the bottom of society to the top. The wealthy and the employers were awarded tax breaks, depleting the public coffers. The loss of tax revenues was then used as the excuse for substantial cuts in social spending. The gap between great wealth and working class incomes widened as never before. Today in Germany, one in eight children lives in a family that depends on welfare support.

In domestic policy, Interior Minister Otto Schily followed in the footsteps of the "black sheriff" Manfred Kanther, continuing his attacks on democratic rights and on immigrants. In foreign policy, the SPD-Green Party government deployed German troops in international combat

missions for the first time since World War Two.

The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) adopted the reformist banner of the SPD just as this party was consigning it to the rubbish heap. The precursor of the PDS—the Socialist Unity Party, the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany—had quashed every expression of resistance against the Stalinist dictatorship, branding it an attack on "socialism." With the collapse of East Germany, the Stalinists renamed their party the Party of Democratic Socialism and swore allegiance to the "free market" and private property, promoting the illusion that capitalism was compatible with the interests of working people.

As long as the PDS remained in opposition in the aftermath of German reunification, it was able to sustain illusions in its "left" credentials and the viability of the capitalist market system. With its entry into the Berlin state legislature, however, its political bankruptcy was rapidly revealed.

All the social attacks that the PDS previously condemned are being pushed through in Berlin with PDS support. If any further proof were necessary that the PDS is no alternative to the Social Democrats, it was amply provided by the four years of PDS participation in the Berlin state government.

The PDS entered the Berlin state government in 2001 as a consequence of the Berlin banking scandal. The first official act of the SPD-PDS coalition was to secure the finances of the bank's major investors and shareholders by means of a guarantee valued at 21.6 billion euros.

Then one blow followed upon the other: the cutting of 15,000 jobs in the public services, with 18,000 more to be eliminated by 2012; withdrawal from the local government employers' association, so as to renege on collective bargaining agreements and cut salaries by some 10 percent; a cut of 3,000 jobs and a 10 percent lowering of wages for Berlin public transit employees; massive cuts in jobs and wages in the hospitals; the introduction of some 34,000 so-called "one euro" jobs, partly to supplant regular jobs; a drastic increase in fees charged by kindergartens and day care centres; the abolition of free teaching materials and reductions in school teaching positions; the slashing of subsidies to Berlin's three universities by 75 million euros, corresponding to a cut of 10,000 student positions and more than 200 teaching staff; the sale of the GSW public housing company with its 65,000 dwellings to an American investor and Cerberus.

These are only the most important in the long list of anti-social measures implemented in Berlin for which the SPD-PDS coalition is responsible.

The attacks by the Berlin state legislature on social benefits and public services are at the forefront of such assaults nationwide, outdoing even those states governed by the conservatives. This had led to a dramatic worsening of living conditions for many workers and their families.

The number of industrial jobs in Berlin has shrunk from 260,000 in 1991 to just 102,000. Officially, 18.1 percent are unemployed. Almost 250,000 of the city's 3.3 million inhabitants live on what was previously called "welfare assistance."

Berlin has become the capital of poverty and social decline. Its debts of 60 billion euros are higher than those of any other large city in Europe. Poverty has reached a scale comparable to the worst periods of the 1920s. According to the latest figures, some 20 percent of Berlin's children live below the poverty line, defined as less than 50 percent of the average monthly net income of 1,213 euros.

The PDS, which in the eastern districts of the city is still the strongest party, and which has controlled several key ministries in the state legislature for the last five years (Economics and Employment; Science, Research and Culture; Health and Social Affairs), shares political responsibility for the social disaster in Berlin. Its attempts to present its merger with the Election Alternative organisation (WASG) as the establishment of a new "Left Party" recalls the fable of the emperor's new clothes: the innocent eyes of a child can see that the emperor is naked.

For its part, the Election Alternative is a combination of worn-out Social Democratic and trade union bureaucrats and a handful of middle-class radicals. The organisation's leading members have served inside the SPD and the trade union apparatus for many decades, and supported all of their attacks on the working population. Its leading light, Oskar Lafontaine, spent 40 years in the SPD. He closed down the steel industry when he held the post of prime minister in the state of Saarland. As SPD chairman, he organised the election victory of Gerhard Schröder in 1999, only to capitulate shortly afterwards and leave government without a fight when he encountered opposition from the international financial press.

To expect such figures to change their political course is absurd. What motivates them is not the social needs of workers, but rather the need of German capitalism to contain the class struggle through the promotion of reformist illusions, which in the past had provided a basis for stable capitalist rule. As long as a large majority of the working population believed that capitalism could provide for their basic needs, there was no fear of a return to the violent class conflict that shook the German Reich and the Weimar Republic.

The SPD has moved so far to the right that it can no longer guarantee social stability. This is the motivation for Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi (PDS) to create a new version of the SPD. The Left Party does not represent a break with the politics of the SPD. It is, rather, a desperate attempt to sow new illusions in social democratic policies that have so miserably and visibly failed.

It is within this context that one must view the decision of the Berlin branch of the Election Alternative (WASG) to stand its own candidates against the Party of Democratic Socialism in the upcoming Berlin Senate election. Their candidacy is an attempt to provide a fig leaf to cover up the nakedness of the emperor.

The stance taken by the Berlin WASG is absurd: On a federal level it supports cooperation and unification with the PDS in the form of the Left Party, while in Berlin it runs its own candidate against the PDS. This contradiction arises from that fact that the practice of the Berlin Senate has completely discredited the Left Party even before it has properly gotten off the ground.

The Berlin WASG maintains that the programme of the Left Party has been disfigured in the capital to the point of non-recognition. The opposite is the case: the programme of the Left Party has been made transparent in Berlin. The Berlin Senate reveals what can be expected from this party wherever it enters government.

The controversy over the candidacy of the Berlin branch of the WASG has already showed what both the Left Party and the WASG think of democratic principles. When the Berlin regional organisation of the WASG did not follow the wishes of the national executive and agree to drop its election campaign in Berlin, the national executive stripped its Berlin branch of its powers—until the national executive was forced to revoke this decision by a court order. One can only imagine how such a party would treat its own members, let alone opposition from the working class, if it ever came to power.

The Socialist Equality Party looks upon the machinations of the Left Party and the WASG with contempt. The decline of social reformism has objective causes that cannot be overcome by palace intrigue and tactical manoeuvres. All over the world, social democratic parties are following the same course. The conversion of the British Labour Party into a new edition of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party is only the clearest expression of this process. It is necessary to confront this fact and draw the appropriate political conclusions. Otherwise, social decline will find expression, by default, in the growth of extreme right-wing forces.

The causes for the bankruptcy of reformism

Fundamental changes in world economy have stripped away the basis for social reformism. Today's economy is controlled by transnational companies and international financial concerns that, in the hunt for cheap labour, low taxes and raw materials, pit workers in one country against workers in other countries and use low wages in China and elsewhere to reduce social standards throughout the world.

Reformist attempts to distribute the wealth on a "fair" basis between the "social partners," within the national framework, collapse under conditions where finance and investment can be diverted to countries with lower taxes and more depressed wages.

The SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions react by moving closer to the government. They take up responsibility for the defence of "Germany as an industrial location" and the campaign for the "international competitiveness" of German companies. This means, and can only mean, complicity in wage and job cuts and the gutting of the welfare state. It also means helping German capital play German workers off against their class brothers and sisters internationally. As social conflicts intensify, so do the efforts of these agencies to line up with big business and preach the identity of interests between workers and bosses.

Globalisation has removed the basis for reformism. At the same time, it has established more powerfully than ever before the material conditions for the solution of fundamental social problems.

In themselves, the global integration of production and the associated revolutionary technological innovations in computers, telecommunications and transportation have enormous progressive potential. For the first time, it is possible to concentrate and coordinate the productive energies of mankind worldwide, while allowing large parts of not only industrial, but also clerical work to be done by machines. This enormous increase in human productivity has created the means to overcome poverty and backwardness all over the world, and increase living standards for all people.

This presupposes, however, the liberation of the productive forces from the restraints of private property, making possible a planned and controlled development of society. The myth of the "free market" as the key to social progress is being disproved on a daily basis. Capitalist companies are incapable of rationally organising production. Instead, they subordinate social requirements to the drive for profit and personal enrichment of a few. The result is rapid social decline, increasing tensions between the great powers, militarism and war.

Whole world regions have been plunged into indescribable poverty, while a tiny minority swim in wealth. The natural environment is being rapidly destroyed. In their struggle for raw materials, markets and strategic advantage, the great powers are once again resorting to military means. This is the background to the Iraq war, military threats against Iran and the intensified tensions between the US, China, Russia and Europe. As was the case between 1914 and 1939, the crisis of capitalism threatens the prospect of world war.

At the same time, the number of the workers—i.e., those whose existence is dependent on the sale of their labour power—has massively increased on a world scale. Countries such as China and India have been transformed into workshops of the world.

Despite enormous social differences, conditions of work are tending to converge all over the world. Everywhere, workers are confronted with the same transnational companies, the same pressure on their wages and the same conditions of work, and—due to modern communications—are better informed about world events than ever before. Even the lives of what were formerly middle-class layers—office workers, university graduates, the self-employed—barely differ today from those of workers. These layers are also confronted with precarious conditions of work and forced to contend with sinking wages and economic insecurity.

The international working class is an enormous social force. The Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International pursue the goal of

transforming it into a conscious political power capable of uniting against the international financial oligarchy.

What the Socialist Equality Party proposes

Instead of remaining passive and disinterested, ever-larger sections of the population are demonstrating their hostility to official politics. This is a development we welcome.

Under the surface, an enormous social explosion is being prepared. While politicians and journalists warn against social conflict, we see our task in preparing and directing such a development in a progressive direction. A rebellion by the masses is both inevitable and necessary. Only the intervention of millions in political events can put an end to the domination of society by an arrogant oligarchy.

We base ourselves on this mobilisation and propose a socialist programme to meet human needs and overcome the social disaster created by capitalist anarchy.

For social justice and equality

Jobs, pensions, health care and education are fundamental social rights. They must take priority over the profit interests of big business. The overcoming of mass unemployment requires a huge programme of public works to create jobs for millions in vital areas such as education, health care, provision for the elderly, culture and the rebuilding of the socio-economic infrastructure. Every citizen must have the benefit of a state-guaranteed pension that provides for a comfortable and secure retirement, an extensive and publicly financed system of health care, and free access to education, up to and including university level.

An extensive programme to meet social needs presupposes the rational organisation of the economy in the interests of society as a whole, rather than its subordination to the profit interests of big business and the banks. Major concerns and financial institutions must be brought under public ownership and made subject to social and democratic control. Small enterprises, which currently struggle to survive under the pressure of big business, must be assured access to cheap credit so that they can guarantee decent wages to their workers. A system of rigorous taxation must be introduced for those at the highest income levels and for major share- and property-holders, in order to finance a programme of social development. Recent proposals for a symbolic increase in the taxation of millionaires are totally inadequate for the realisation of such a project.

For the defence of democratic rights and the rights of immigrants

The struggle for democratic rights and the fight for social rights are intimately connected. There can be no talk of any real democracy as long as social wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small minority, the workplace is a de facto dictatorship of the bosses, and workers are denied democratic control over decision-making, the press and media remain at the beck and call of big business, and education and culture are dominated by a small elite. Cuts in the spheres of culture, education and the arts, in particular, do enormous damage to the fabric of society. There is a profound connection between the glorification of militarism, brutality and egoism and the denigration of past artistic and cultural achievements.

Workers have no nation. We unconditionally defend the democratic and social rights of refugees and immigrants. We are for the immediate repeal of Germany's reactionary and discriminatory immigration laws and utterly oppose the criminalisation and deportation of refugees. We defend unconditionally the right of people to live and work in the European country of their choice. Witch-hunts launched against immigrants and attempts to sow divisions on the basis of religion, colour or country of origin are all designed to split the working class and keep the masses in check. Refugees and immigrants represent a significant section of the

working class, and will play an important role in the struggles to come.

Against war and militarism

The struggle against unemployment and the dismantling of the welfare state cannot be separated from the fight against war and neo-colonialism.

Working people must develop their own independent response to the dangers arising from the eruption of American imperialism. They must not allow themselves to be lulled into complacency by the attempts at conciliation with Washington by the German and other European governments. The aggressive militarism of US imperialism threatens to plunge humanity into a catastrophe. It is the greatest single danger threatening world peace.

We are in favour of the immediate dismantling of NATO and the closure of all American bases in Europe.

At the same time that European governments seek to conciliate with Washington, they are busy pursuing their own imperialist projects. This is what lies behind the reorganisation of the German Army and moves towards the development of a joint European strike force and an independent European armaments industry. We oppose such developments and call for the immediate withdrawal of German and other European troops from the Balkans, Afghanistan and Congo, as well as from Iraq and the rest of the Middle East.

For the unification of Europe on a socialist basis

At the core of such a political reorientation of the working class is an international perspective. Not a single social problem can be solved within the limits of a regional or national framework. Workers in Berlin and other parts of the country must vigorously oppose the splitting tactics of the trade unions, which play off one work force against another. Instead of allowing themselves to be pitted against their fellow workers, German workers must accept responsibility for their colleagues in eastern Europe and undertake a combined struggle against low-wage labour.

In opposition to the unification of Europe from above—in the interest of big business and the banks—we propose the unification of the continent from below in the struggle to establish the United Socialist States of Europe.

Within the framework of a Europe united on socialist foundations, it will be possible to prevent the further fracturing of the continent into rival national states and place the region's enormous wealth and productive forces at the disposal of society as a whole. Such a unification would enable the European working class to oppose US imperialism and encourage the American working class to take on the warmongers in the White House. It would be an enormous inspiration for oppressed peoples all over the world to oppose imperialism.

The Socialist Equality Party

The Socialist Equality Party has neither a large apparatus nor rich and influential backers. What we do have is ideas, a programme and a powerful tradition.

We represent the legacy of millions of workers and intellectuals over the past 150 years who invested their enthusiasm, energy and in some cases their lives to establish a better, more humane society. Stalinist and bourgeois apologists have complemented one another in seeking to erase these struggles from history. But in light of the profound crisis of world capitalism, the lessons drawn from the great struggles of the past—both victories and defeats—have great importance.

As the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the Socialist Equality Party bases itself on a unique historical tradition. The Fourth International is living proof that there exists a Marxist alternative to social democracy and Stalinism, the latter of

which, whether in Moscow or East Berlin, fraudulently claimed to represent the continuity of Marxism.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 by Leon Trotsky to defend the programme of socialist internationalism against the degeneration of the Communist International. Its roots go back to the Left Opposition, which, beginning in 1923, fought against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of opponents of Stalinism lost their lives in the blood purges of the 1930s—virtually all of them accused of supporting Trotskyism.

The historical continuity of the Trotskyist movement is today embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International. Domination of the workers' movement by social democracy and Stalinism made it possible to isolate the Marxist tradition. Now, however, the political bankruptcy of these bureaucracies opens a new historical period in which the Fourth International finds a growing response. In the *World Socialist Web Site*, the ICFI possesses an instrument that is gaining a worldwide audience and increasingly coming to be recognised as the authentic voice of Marxism.

To ensure the success of its election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party requires broad support—to collect the necessary signatures to obtain ballot status, to distribute political material, and to organise a series of election meetings. We also need generous donations to finance our campaign.

We appeal to all those who reject the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party/PDS Senate and stress: it is not enough to be indignant over the policies of these parties. It is necessary to recognise one's own political responsibility and actively support the building of the Socialist Equality Party.



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