

Germany: SEP collects required signatures to stand in Berlin elections

Our reporter team
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In the last five weeks, dozens of members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) have collected nearly 3,000 signatures at employment offices, shopping centres and universities in Berlin to qualify for candidacy in the city's senate elections to take place in September.

As stated in the party's election manifesto, which was distributed in thousands of copies during the past week, the PSG is participating in the elections "to provide a clear voice and a revolutionary socialist orientation to the widespread opposition that exists to the policies of the Berlin state government, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism." The PSG regards its participation "as 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."

All parties that are not officially represented in the senate or German parliament (Bundestag) are required to submit 2,200 signatures of support to the national returning officer in order to appear on the ballot form. This total constitutes nearly 0.1 percent of the population entitled to vote. Those signing must give their full name, including maiden name, date of birth and current address. The district electoral registration offices must examine the data on each individual form and certify that the person concerned is entitled to vote, gave correct information and did not sign for any other party. Only then can the PSG turn over the confirmed signatures to the national returning officer.

Despite these bureaucratic hurdles, many citizens were prepared to support the candidacy of the PSG. In particular, the international and socialist perspectives of the PSG met with active interest. A number of workers who do not possess German citizenship registered their

disappointment that they could not support the PSG with their signature. Many first read the election manifesto and then signed to support the list of the party's candidates. Some were already familiar with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Alexander C. is 37 years old, is unemployed and comes from the Berlin suburb of Neukölln. He read the election manifesto of the PSG and then signed immediately, agreeing with many of the demands made in the programme. The only difference between the other parties, he said, was their name—they all follow the dictates of big business. Instead, he said, one must place human requirements and needs at the centre. Annika P., 23, from Lichtenberg, explained she was signing because she agreed that today workers could only defend their rights internationally.

Marek D, who came to Germany from Poland 20 years ago to work as a bricklayer, also supported the PSG campaign. "A political alternative is absolutely necessary," he said. "Every year things get worse." Marek also complained about the huge rises in the cost of living, in particular for rent and electricity. Just 10 years ago, he paid half the sum he now pays for his flat, but his wages have hardly increased over the same period.

In Berlin, the social crisis is very sharply developed. Unemployment in the capital officially stands at about 18.1 percent, and an additional 250,000 inhabitants are dependent on paltry Unemployment Pay II payments. At €60 billion, Berlin has the highest level of debt of all European capital cities. Nearly one in five children live under the official poverty level.

The city's SPD-PDS senate is directly responsible for this situation. In Berlin, the SPD and Left Party lead the country in terms of dismantling social and welfare gains. They slashed 15,000 jobs in public service and

withdrew from the local employers' association in order to impose a 10 percent wage cut for those workers left with a job. They have also imposed massive redundancies and wage cuts in Berlin's transport services and hospitals. Funding for universities and nursery education has also been cut. The list of welfare cuts implemented by the Berlin senate is lengthy.

Many people react to these bitter experiences with open hostility to the government parties. While some encountered by the PSG campaigners were turning away from politics and refused their signature, saying they saw no sense in a new party, many more signed because the PSG clearly distinguishes itself from the bureaucrats in the PDS and the Election Alternative group (WASG) and fights for an independent movement of the working class.

According to Wiebke S., a young barrister from Treptow, the Left Party has completely discredited itself. She said, "A party which allows a situation where young children in Berlin do not even receive a warm meal during the day because their parents are socially deprived is for me unelectable." Her own salary is so small that despite having undertaken further studies she would rank herself among the "academic proletariat." She immediately supported the candidacy of a party that stands to the left of the Party of Democratic Socialism.

Twenty-eight-year-old Jens L. from Wedding also spontaneously gave his signature because the PSG calls for the independence of the workers' movement from the old bureaucracies. He no longer expected much from the Left Party. Upon being asked what he thought of the WASG, he answered: "I cannot take this group seriously. On the one hand, they sit together with the PDS in the Bundestag and want to merge with them, and on the other hand, they seek to put up candidates against the PDS here in Berlin. They have no differences regarding programme and Left Party leader Mr. Lafontaine has even already sat in the government."



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