

An exchange of letters on the German “Election Alternative” and “Socialist Alternative” groups

Lucas Adler
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The following is a letter received by the WSWS on “Germany: Election Alternative, the Socialist Alternative Group and Trotskyism”, followed by a reply by Lucas Adler, one of the article’s authors.

Dear editors of the WSWS,

First of all, I’d like to thank you for the sophisticated analysis of the current political scene regularly presented in your articles. I’ve been reading the WSWS with great interest for several years now. Please, keep up the good work!

I’d like to come straight to the point with my question about your article “Germany: Election Alternative, the Socialist Alternative Group and Trotskyism.” If I understand you correctly, your main criticism concerning the politics of the Socialist Alternative Group (SAV)—apart from your theoretical differences—is as follows: You believe that a transformation of the existing “major working class parties” into openly revolutionary, socialist parties—as the SAV apparently tries to do, judging from its programme—is impossible, and that any attempts to do this are undertaken for purely opportunistic reasons.

Firstly, I’d like to say that I fundamentally agree with your position. Nevertheless, I have to put the following question: What kind of tactics do you employ for the building of such a new, genuinely socialist party? It’s no use kidding ourselves. Unfortunately, Trotskyism in Germany and worldwide currently lacks the broad support needed to build such a party. In this respect, I think SAV is right: sadly, the majority of people are still convinced that capitalism can reform itself.

To get to the point: What must be done to construct a revolutionary party that is capable of preparing people for social upheaval? Theoretical analysis and hypotheses certainly have their place—they are, in fact, absolutely essential. But what practical steps have to be taken to build a working class movement that is ready for battle?

I’ve thought about this question a lot, without coming up with a satisfactory answer. Hopefully, you’ll be able to help me in the matter.

With socialist greetings,
SB

Dear SB,

Thank you for your letter. We are glad to hear about your interest in the WSWS.

You ask, “What must be done to build a revolutionary party?” and suggest that the main obstacle to building such a party is that “sadly, the majority of people are still convinced that capitalism can reform itself.”

In presenting the prevalence of illusions in the ability of capitalism to reform itself, or, to put the matter differently, a lack of understanding among broad masses of workers that their interests can be defended only through a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, as a major, if not insuperable, obstacle to building a mass socialist party, you are actually making a circular argument.

The need for a revolutionary socialist party arises precisely from the fact that socialist consciousness does not, and cannot, arise spontaneously out of the immediate struggles and experiences of the working class. It must, as Lenin said, be brought into the working class “from outside” the sphere of their immediate experiences. That is precisely the task assigned by history to the revolutionary Marxist party.

The need for such a party arises from that fact that only a party based on the scientific world outlook and program of Marxism can enable the working class to overcome the dominant bourgeois consciousness in capitalist society, and raise its level of social and political consciousness to that required to fulfil its revolutionary tasks. Such a party can be built only the basis of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the working class and, above all, the socialist movement itself—the lessons of the struggle against the devastating impact of opportunism on the workers’ movement, above all in the form of Stalinism and social democracy.

In past years, millions of workers and young people have experienced bitter disappointment in relation to reformist parties and trade unions. Until now, they have been voting with their feet: abstaining from ballots and cancelling their party and union memberships.

The SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the trade unions are now merely empty bureaucratic shells consisting of careerists and lackeys. Nowadays, hardly any active members are to be found in these organisations. To the extent that workers continue to pay their contributions, they do so as a kind of insurance—just as people pay their automobile insurance so that they can claim help in the event of a breakdown, and not because they want to support the automobile industry.

Many workers realise they have come to a dead end. They have been betrayed and abandoned by their old organisations, but they are still unable to put their trust in a revolutionary alternative.

The responsibility for this impasse lies with social democracy and Stalinism, which for decades have betrayed and suppressed the once strong socialist traditions of the working class movement.

Workers, however, show no lack of anger, indignation or readiness

to fight. This is indicated by—among other things—the protests against the Hartz IV social benefits laws and the strikes by doctors and civil servants in Germany, the widespread reaction to the attacks on job security in France, and the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war internationally. All these movements ended in failure because they were hijacked, sabotaged and sold out by the reformist organisations.

Nevertheless, further bitter class confrontations are inevitable. Unlike the situation after the Second World War, capitalism no longer has the option of avoiding them by granting limited social concessions. Globalization of the productive forces has undermined the politics of social reform.

Revolutionary struggles develop from fundamental contradictions within capitalist society; they are not the result of agitation or the will of revolutionaries. In our epoch, these contradictions are once again being expressed in the form of imperialist wars, mass poverty and the dismantling of social and democratic rights. They are bringing the fundamental existential interests of workers into irreconcilable conflict with capitalist society.

Our work is to prepare for the coming class confrontations. Above all, this entails the following:

First, we have to raise the consciousness of the working class in a systematic way. It has to become aware of the irreconcilable contradiction between its own social interests and existing social relations.

Over a hundred years ago, Lenin wrote: “In order to become a Social Democrat (i.e., a Marxist), the worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp the meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum *camouflages* its selfish strivings and its real ‘inner workings’; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected” (*What Is To Be Done?*).

The same holds for today. The worker has to have a clear conception of the most important events in world politics, the consequences of globalization, the situation concerning immigrants, the different political tendencies, the lessons to be drawn from history, etc.

Secondly, the working class has to completely dissociate itself from the political influence of the SPD, the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism and the reformist trade unions, which subordinate it to the interests of capital and betray it in each and every struggle.

The work of the *World Socialist Web Site* focuses on both of these objectives. Each day, it analyses the most important international events, publishes articles on cultural, historical and theoretical issues, and fights against the influence of reformist parties. When we intervene in labour disputes, make tactical demands or participate in elections, we always do so with the intention of raising the consciousness of the working class and promoting its independence from reformist organisations.

Leon Trotsky concisely summarised the correlation between the working class and the revolutionary party in the preface to his *History of the Russian Revolution*. “The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction,” he writes, “but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old régime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a political programme, and even this still requires the test of events, and the approval of the masses. The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the tasks arising from the social crisis:

the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations.”

The first and most important task of a revolutionary party is to clearly state the way things are. That means mercilessly exposing the right-wing, decayed character of the Left Party and the WASG (Election Alternative). Only when this is done will the working class be able to comprehend the “tasks arising from the social crisis” and make them the basis of the active defence of their interests.

Even this is flatly rejected by SAV. While we strive to free workers from the influence of the SPD and Left Party in order to prepare them for the coming revolutionary confrontations, SAV tries to serve as a left cover for the WASG. By actively cooperating with this organisation and endeavouring to give the WASG a touch of left-wing ideology, it is blinding workers to political realities. Thus, it attempts to prevent the working class from comprehending the “tasks arising from the social crisis” and prepares the way for further defeat and frustration for workers.

Wither this kind of politics leads can be seen from what is happening in Brazil and Italy. There, radical organisations have used similar arguments to those of SAV to support the Workers’ Party of Brazil’s President Lula da Silva and the Italian Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) party, thereby serving as a model for SAV. Members of these groupings currently occupy ministerial posts in governments that enjoy the complete trust of international capitalism and enforce anti-working-class policies.

I would now like to briefly summarise my answer to your question. The active construction of a revolutionary party requires a constant clarification and development of political perspectives through the continuing growth of the *World Socialist Web Site*. In this respect, incidentally, a strict distinction between “theoretical hypotheses” and “practical steps,” as formulated in your letter, cannot be drawn. The daily activities of a Marxist party are always determined by its theoretical perspective. Every political task emerges from a political analysis. To this extent, the theory and practice of a revolutionary party cannot be separated.

However, such a separation is extremely common among opportunists. It provides them with a justification for evading the necessary political tasks. The best example of this is SAV’s blind conviction that a revolutionary working class party can be built by promoting a reformist party.

I hope I have answered your question and look forward to hearing from you again.

Yours sincerely,
Lucas Adler



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