

The bankruptcy of the “left” state government in Berlin: political experiences and lessons

Part 1

Ulrich Rippert
27 September 2006

We are publishing here the first part of a speech given by Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany and a member of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site. The speech was delivered at an election campaign meeting of the PSG held September 16 in Berlin. Rippert was one of three PSG candidates who ran for the Berlin state Senate. The election took place on September 17.

The second part of Rippert's speech will be posted Thursday, September 28.

Dear comrades and friends,

I am very pleased to speak at this meeting alongside David North and Chris Marsden, who represent our co-thinkers in Britain and the US. The international platform at this meeting reflects the very nature of our political perspective.

There are a thousand things that differentiate us from all other parties. However, one aspect stands out: We are internationalists and are building an international party. We regard every political development in its international context and stress that not a single social problem can be resolved without the political cooperation and unification of working people throughout the world.

The entire election campaign of the establishment parties that is concluding in Berlin today has stood in glaring contrast to this principle. It was a consummate expression of narrow mindedness and provincialism. Anyone who experienced the election meetings of the other parties in recent weeks, whether it was the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, the Left Party or any of the others, heard people who spoke about district building projects, enlarging the “green belt,” or the like.

From the beginning, we saw our intervention in this election campaign very differently. In our election manifesto we say, “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 wrote that on June 22, when the bombs had not yet started falling in Lebanon.

At the same time, we have made clear that none of the problems that exist in this city or throughout the country can be resolved within a national or regional framework. Regardless of which party emerges tomorrow with the most votes, or how the new state legislatures stack up here in Berlin or in Mecklenburg Pomerania, none of the great problems that daily confront working people will be resolved—quite the opposite.

This is why we said the following in our election manifesto: “Our aim is not to beg for charity 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.” In other words, we participated in these elections in order to advance the construction of an international socialist party.

At the same time, we were not limited simply to spreading propaganda for our ideas and political convictions. We approached the discussions about our programme from the point of view of analyzing the changes in the political situation and examining the developments faced by the traditional parties.

Above all, two trends were noticeable: First, the discontent in the population is constantly increasing. We have in the past spoken about a growing political alienation of large sections of the population from the traditional parties. This increasing alienation is now expressed in an open rejection and enmity towards the government parties.

Second, one must say that this opposition still exhibits a relatively low level of political consciousness and is at a very elementary level.

When in the early summer we were collecting the 2,500 signatures needed to obtain ballot status, many comrades were surprised at the scale of agreement that we encountered. We did not need to discuss things with people for very long. We said that we completely rejected the SPD-Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism-controlled Senate and its anti-social austerity policies, and that a new party had to be developed that is directed against the entire capitalist system. This was usually sufficient to secure a signature.

The anger that many people felt toward the Senate government of the SPD and Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism was tangible—a government that makes left noises while implementing devastating cuts in social spending.

This was also visible in other ways. As in earlier election campaigns, we participated in the special television broadcast for the minority parties. This broadcast took the form of short interviews with representatives of the smaller parties that are not presently represented in parliament.

In the past, these included many political cranks, such as the Auto Drivers' Party, the Beer Drinkers Party, or religious fanatics like the Bible-True Christians, etc. Two years ago, during the European elections, and last year in the federal elections, we were obligated to carefully consider if it made any sense to participate in the programme.

Nevertheless, we participated again and this time it was completely different. There were noticeably fewer political cranks. Instead, we encountered a multitude of small parties formed by groups taking up specific issues who feel they are no longer represented by the traditional parties.

Now suddenly there was a “Parents Party.” A mother of three had established it together with friends. Before the camera she explained she had felt compelled to found this party and participate in the elections

because the problems facing families are so serious that one must do something in order to find a hearing and oppose things politically.

Another new group called itself the “Education Party.” It was founded in recent months by a grammar school teacher who stressed he wanted to make the problems in education a political issue. Many politicians had no idea of the effects the education cuts were having. The situation in Berlin’s schools was simply scandalous.

Then there was the Party of the Unemployed. In answer to the moderator’s question that with nearly twenty percent unemployment in Berlin this party should gain massive support, the representative said it was not like that. Many unemployed people feel demoralized and isolated with their problems. He had created the party in order to motivate these people and help them realise their civil rights.

Despite all their differences, these parties have two things in common: They are convinced that nobody represents their interests and that the official parties have long since abandoned the interests of ordinary people. Second, they believe that it is necessary to have political representation and have therefore taken matters in their own hands.

The anxiety felt by the political establishment about this development was shown in the reaction to our party during the TV broadcast. The moderator picked out the following paragraph from our election manifesto: “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.” And he drew from this the conclusion that the PSG was a violent organization.

Christoph Vandreier, who was representing our party, responded to the accusation forcefully and very well. He said, “Just a moment, there is not a word here about violence. But if we are speaking about violence, then we should not forget Iraq and Lebanon, because what is happening there is violence in the interest of profits. And this is exactly what we are against.” Comrade Vandreier was constantly interrupted, and could hardly finish a sentence, and the accusation that the PSG advocated violence was constantly repeated.

It is interesting that the same day I was confronted with exactly the same question in a radio interview, although less aggressively. A reporter from *Radioropa* from Vienna quoted the same paragraph from our manifesto and asked: “Is the PSG a democratic party or a revolutionary party?” I answered that we were a democratic party and therefore a revolutionary party, since democratic conditions can be established only through the broad mobilization of the population, which has made its goal the overthrow of the existing political order.

The society in which we live calls itself democratic, but is it really? In the election one can vote only for parties that represent the same policies on all substantial questions. Last year, the then-SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder instigated early parliamentary elections. All the constitutional bodies supported him in this, despite the fact that the constitution prohibits the manoeuvre of a sham parliamentary vote of no confidence. The aim of these elections was to implement a policy that has been rejected by the majority of the population. What is democratic about that?

And another thing—what is the state of democracy in the boardrooms of the corporations and banks where daily decisions are made that directly concern the lives of millions? Who elected the chairmen of the boards and their colleagues? Where is their democratic accountability? The fact remains that truly democratic conditions can be established only through a broad political movement from below and the transformation of the existing social conditions.

We say very clearly in our election manifesto—and we mean exactly what we say—“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.”

The increasing alienation—or rather, the increasing resistance in the population against the official parties—is the result of political experiences

that have been made over recent years, but which few yet understand. We must make these experiences conscious for working people.

I think that the seven years the SPD-Green Party federal government was in office provided much material in this regard. Today, does anyone really believe that the SPD or the Greens can still be called left-wing parties? Anyone making such a claim today would be a laughing stock.

But in 1998, the Greens were still regarded as left-wing, and were elected in part because some people thought of them as a left-wing corrective in a government led by the SPD. It took only a few years, and then they stood on the right wing of the SPD-Green Party government.

They explained, in the typical manner of their leader Joschka Fischer, that they saw their task above all in bolstering the Social Democrats so that they did not cave in to the pressure of the people. Today, the Greens are in negotiations with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) to prepare for political collaboration at the federal level—something that is already commonplace at a regional level.

The so-called “Red-Green” (SPD-Green Party) federal government leaves a lasting memory as an administration that carried out the harshest social attacks in Germany since the 1930s. And if one looks at the present crisis of the grand coalition of the SPD-CDU/CSU (Christian Social Union), one must say that the problems of Chancellor Angela Merkel are above all linked to the fact that the Christian Democrats are not able, or are not yet able, to follow as quickly in the footsteps of the SPD. Some conservative social ethicists in the CDU/CSU do not tire of pointing out the fact that the welfare state also has a political function in preserving order, and therefore should be maintained, at least in form.

The previous “Red-Green” coalition quickly abandoned any such doubts. Schröder and Fischer acted according to the maxim, *Après moi, le deluge!* As their anti-social policies embodied in “Agenda 2010” and “Hartz IV” met with ever greater resistance in the population, the SPD simply organized early elections with the express goal of handing over power to the CDU, which they then did.

I do not know whether Schröder dissolved the government one year ago in order to take over as chief of the Russian energy conglomerate Gazprom, or vice versa—whether he became chief of Gazprom because he dissolved the government. But one thing is certain: the road from the chancellery to the boardroom of Gazprom was merely the pinnacle of the corruption and political irresponsibility that marked this government like hardly any other.

I also do not know what the chair is called that former foreign minister Joschka Fischer now occupies at the American elite university at Princeton, but perhaps it could be called the “Chair for Political Opportunism.” The Red-Green coalition pursued only one goal: breaking apart the welfare system in the interests of the entrepreneurs, without the least consideration for the social and political consequences for society.

After the experiences with the Red-Green federal government, the voters here in Berlin and in Mecklenburg Pomerania have also had five years of the so-called “Red-Red” state governments under the SPD-Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism. These administrations also provided a lasting political experience for the general population.

What the state governments under the SPD and Left Party have carried out far exceeds what the Red-Green administration did at a federal level. I do not want to go into too many details. In recent weeks we have often spoken about the social disaster that has been created in this city. Berlin is the capital of mass unemployment and poverty, but it is also the capital of political cynicism and corruption.

Perhaps I should say a few words about a meeting I attended with other party members some days ago. The *Tageszeitung* had called a panel discussion in the venerable old Hebbeltheater. The topic for discussion read, “What is the Left?” Naturally, we had not been invited as podium speakers. That was reserved for the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party-PDS and the Election Alternative.

I won't provide a lengthy exposition, but will merely report that the aggressiveness and arrogance with which the chairman of the Senate parliamentary grouping of the Left Party, Stefan Liebig, justified the social attacks on the population were breath-taking.

Liebig emphasised that the SPD and Left Party looked back on five very successful years in the state government. They had carried out much of what the previous CDU-led Berlin Senate and other conservative state governments were always demanding but had failed to deliver, in the teeth of resistance from below.

As an example, he cited Berlin's urban transport system (BVG). The SPD-Left Party Senate had prevented the privatisation of the BVG, which was not easy, he claimed. After succeeding in lowering wages by around ten percent for BVG employees, in collaboration with the trade unions, the BVG management had put the privatisation plans on ice, at least provisionally.

Liebig also presented the cuts in social and education spending—resulting in the closure of sports halls, swimming pools and libraries—as a success in view of the extreme indebtedness of the city. I should not forget to stress that the BVG wage cuts are but a step towards privatisation.

Seldom before has a government party shamelessly praised its anti-social policies as a success like the Berlin Left Party. In a brochure it distributed throughout the city it answered 22 questions. Here are some samples: "Why did the Left Party implement the cuts programme?" The answer is simple: because there was no other possibility, because this city has debts of €60 billion and in the eyes of the Left Party can do nothing other than pay off these debts honestly.

The next question and answer: "Some say, the Left Party is making cuts at the expense of the socially weak, how does it justify this, is it true?" One can only say, yes, it is correct. They even provide some examples why it was necessary to close soup kitchens, in order to carry out restructuring. The next question: "Why are there cuts in culture and education rather than putting in something extra?" They proceed to justify the cuts they imposed on the schools.

This is the election campaign as it was conducted here by the Left Party. This party long ago gave up trying to address the worse-off layers of the population and win their votes. They know that working people have long since turned their backs on these politics and no longer bother to vote. With their arrogant defence of austerity measures, Liebig and company are offering themselves to the conservative layers and big business as guarantors of bourgeois rule.

This is what is causing the indignation in the population. But instead of accepting this and grumbling, would it not be better to pose the question, what did you actually expect? Wasn't it clear from the outset that the Left Party-PDS is nothing more than the continuation of the old East German party of state of the 1990s? Weren't they for the reestablishment of capitalism and the privatisation of all the former state-owned assets from the very beginning? Didn't they say that loudly and clearly? Didn't PDS Central Committee member Christa Luft publish a book entitled *The Joy of Property*? Didn't they play a central role in establishing the mechanisms by which all East Germany's industry was smashed up?

Didn't PDS leader Gregor Gysi at the beginning of the 1990s say they are for the "free market" economy, so that it was worth owning property again? Didn't PDS leader Hans Modrow state that the task of the Party of Democratic Socialism at the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall was to ensure peace and order?

In other words, didn't the PDS do what it had always done, even when it was called the Socialist Unity Party and ran the government of East Germany? It concentrated on preventing any really independent movement in the population, and above all in the working class.

When the West German politicians and companies then tried to make a financial killing in East Germany, the PDS started to whine and Modrow

explained that it was not supposed to work out that way. We want to have our fair share of capitalism!

The PDS' whining was even presented by some as a left-wing or socialist criticism of capitalism. But that was fundamentally misleading. This party was never against capitalism, and all its talk about socialism was just to pull the wool over people's eyes so as to mask their pro-capitalist policies.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact