

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

## Part 2

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*We are publishing here the second and concluding 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 first part of Rippert's speech was posted Wednesday, September 27.*

We are the only party that neither held nor promoted illusions in the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). They can change their name as often as they like—whether they call themselves the Left Party or the Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism, whether they call themselves socialist democrats or democratic socialists—it changes nothing of substance. This is still in essence the old Stalinist party of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). It exercised power in 1953 in East Berlin and used brutal force to suppress a working class rebellion, and again in 1956 when it sent tanks to suppress the Hungarian Revolution and defend the privileged party and state bureaucracy in Budapest.

It is here also that we differentiate ourselves fundamentally from the Election Alternative—For Work and Social Justice (WASG). In a certain sense, the WASG is our exact opposite. Their chief aim is to prevent people drawing clear conclusions about the true character of the Left Party/PDS, while we stress that clarity on the Left Party-PDS and its politics is essential.

I want to explain this somewhat more precisely. The WASG is trying to develop a broad catch-all left-wing movement in which all those disappointed and frustrated “lefts” can find a home. This includes the political remnants and split-offs from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Pabloites, the radicals, ex-radicals and “left” radicals, and so on.

In order to secure “left majorities,” they tirelessly search for left-wing currents in the trade unions, the SPD and the Left Party. This inevitably results in the same thing: subordinating the working class to the old Stalinist, social democratic and reformist bureaucracies.

We represent exactly the opposite. For us, it is a matter of securing the political independence of the working class. That means we fight for a conscious political break with the SPD, the Left Party/PDS and all those groups that exist on the periphery of these bureaucracies.

The future of society will not be decided by “left majorities” in parliament, but in a living struggle of social classes. This is why Marxists have always maintained that the crucial factor is the political independence of the working class, because only this can actually change the balance of power—to the degree that the working class acts as an independent and politically conscious class.

The positions of the WASG in this election campaign were quite absurd. In a conflict with the Left Party/PDS nationally, it pushed through its right to stand its own candidates against the Left Party in Berlin. Meanwhile, at a federal level, it is seeking to merge with this very same party.

The reason for this contradiction is that the WASG fears that the project of building a left party, a catch-all left-wing movement, could fail here in Berlin before it really gets started. Because here in Berlin it is already becoming visible what the Left Party/PDS really is, and because its policies are already despised in the general population.

It is not my job to give advice to the WASG. But they could simplify their complicated name, “Election Alternative— For Work and Social Justice,” and just call themselves the “Fig Leaf Party.” In Italy, there was a party alliance called the “Olive Tree.” Why shouldn't there be a grouping here that calls itself the “Fig Leaf?” That would at least make its political function very clear, since the role of the WASG consists of covering up the political nakedness of the Party of Democratic Socialism.

This brings me to my next point. What has been the result of the policies of the “Red-Red” state legislature here in Berlin? We have already spoken about the social misery that exists. What are the political consequences? What will the headlines in the press be on Monday when the election results are announced? One of the headlines will surely read, “Election Shock in Mecklenburg Pomerania: Neo-Nazis Enter State Legislature.”

The German National Party (NPD) campaigned in the election as a conscious right-wing extremist, neo-fascist organisation, and displayed a tremendous political and organisational aggressiveness. The Left Party/PDS, the Social Democratic Party and all those covering up for the government from the “left” bear responsibility for their ability to do this.

Why? This state government has not only accelerated the social decline, which means many families face dire poverty and their very existence is threatened, but it also created the conditions for political despair by implementing the social attacks under the guise of it being a left-wing policy. This is what creates the dung that the right-wing demagogues exploit.

I would like to quote a section of the NPD's manifesto, from their so-called Action Programme: “Debt, unemployment, the devastation of industry, social rootlessness, too many foreigners, violence and an education emergency are some of the key words describing the situation in our city.” In other words, the “Red-Red” Berlin Senate, exactly like the previous “Red-Green” federal government, has abandoned the social question to the right wing. This is why the right-wing demagogues can pose as the representatives of the “little man.”

Again from the NPD Action Programme: “The basis for a socially fair order has been eliminated. Those responsible are the establishment parties

and the media cartel that function as props of high finance. An endless drive for profits, above all by big capital, has destroyed the existing order and thereby placed in question the political and economic system of the Federal Republic [of Germany] and the European Union.”

How have the Left Party and the other official parties reacted to this growth of the right? There are two different responses.

First, they call for a strengthening of the state. Forward to the police state!

Green Party politician Volker Beck states that the NPD, and I quote, “must be actively opposed by consistent police actions and the intervention of state attorneys.” Then he demands, and I quote again, “this must be linked with the intensive surveillance of the NPD and the entire right-wing extremist scene. This requires that the state intelligence agencies improve their exchange of information with the National Bureau of Intelligence.”

In other words, the party that years ago began as a civil rights party is now demanding closer links between the different branches of the secret service. And this in a country where the bitter experience with the Nazi Gestapo led to a very deliberate separation and strict regulation of the secret services.

SPD Vice Chair Wolfgang Thierse has demanded “tougher action by the police and a ban on the NPD.” How long ago was it that the first attempt failed to ban the NPD? That was in the summer of 2002. And why did it fail? Because it was found that a whole series of secret service agents were active inside the NPD leadership.

Some of the documents that were meant to serve as the basis for the ban originated directly or indirectly from the pens of secret service operatives. To a significant degree, this far-right party was controlled by the state and used to direct social protest into right-wing channels and at the same time serve as the justification for the preparation of a police state.

The second reaction to the growth of the far right is the demand for the “unity of all democrats.” An alliance must be established that goes beyond party boundaries.

What lies behind this slogan, “Unity against the right?” It means that the Left Party and all those around it move closer to the right. All the political tendencies calling themselves democrats are moving closer together, while Bavarian state Interior Minister Beckstein says that one must make the right redundant by adopting its politics. The unity of all democrats against the right is the watchword for a sharp rightward shift by the entire political establishment.

I think the German Armed Forces mission in Lebanon must also be seen in this connection, because the right-wing tendencies in the establishment are closely linked to the development of militarism and war.

The decision that the Bundestag (the federal parliament) will make in the coming week, to use Germany’s Armed Forces in Lebanon, is bound up with deep-going political changes. It would be wrong to think that because the German Armed Forces are already active in the Balkans and Afghanistan, in Sudan, the Congo and elsewhere that a naval operation in Lebanon only signifies a quantitative expansion. No, this is a qualitatively new development. The deployment of Germany’s Armed Forces in Lebanon is a component of the European Union’s biggest military operation in its entire history.

Those countries that in the past were against operations in Iraq—above all Germany and France—are now the main proponents of war. Where does this come from? How is this to be understood? There are many reasons. I will limit myself to the most important.

The US war in Iraq and the US occupation of that country have led to a military disaster. The bombardment of Lebanon has discredited the Israeli government before the world public, and at the same time has shown that the Israeli military is not able to destroy Hezbollah.

Under these conditions, the European political elite is deeply anxious. A situation has developed that was feared from the outset. It is clear that the

entire situation in the Middle East is extremely unstable and threatens to get out of control.

Under these conditions, the European powers are intervening militarily in order to try to save what can still be saved. Naturally, they thereby pursue their own imperialist interests. They want to use the weakness of the US in this region to strengthen their own influence.

However, this means that the military operation in Lebanon has its own consequences and dynamics. Germany is now part of this war, and that will strongly change Germany and Europe.

There is also another aspect. Foreign policy always has direct consequences for domestic policy. In recent years, the European governments have encountered fierce popular resistance—in France and Holland they failed to gain support for the European Union constitution, there were youth revolts in the suburbs of Paris, there were mass demonstrations across France against the dismantling of employment protections, there were demonstrations in Germany against “Agenda 2010” and “Hartz IV,” etc. The European governments are now launching a military offensive abroad combined with police-state measures at home to implement the aims of the EU against the general population.

That is why in our election manifesto we link the fight against welfare cuts and the defense of social achievements with the struggle against war. It is impossible to conduct a fight against war and against an imperialist foreign policy without at the same time fighting against welfare cuts and the dismantling of democratic rights. Both are directly connected. This is the basis on which to mobilise the population for a socialist policy.

I would just like to briefly refer to a text that we wrote one and half decades ago. Some 15 years ago, we organised an international conference here in Berlin against imperialist war and colonialism. On May 1, 1991, we published a statement calling for this conference, which then took place in November.

If you read this statement—and you should read it—you will see that we were very farsighted and correctly estimated the international situation.

We wrote at that time: “The post-war equilibrium of imperialism, which formed the basis for the huge worldwide expansion of capitalism, has collapsed. It cannot be restored through peaceful means because all of the relations between the different components of the old equilibrium have changed. This is not due to the subjective desires of individual leaders of bourgeois states, but is rather bound up with the objective consequences of economic and social contradictions that are beyond their control. At the heart of the instability of world imperialism is the crisis of the United States.”

Somewhat further down, we describe this more exactly and say: “Against a background of intensifying social crisis with potentially revolutionary consequences, the attempt by American imperialism to regain its leading role in the world constitutes one of the most explosive elements in world politics.”

Finally, I would like to stress that we find ourselves in the midst of deep-going political changes. There is always a danger in such situations that we might underestimate the speed and extent of such changes. Perhaps I could give a brief example.

When we met comrade David North at the airport, we went into a café, and just two tables further over sat former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his interior minister, Otto Schily. We did not go up to them and take them to task. That would not have been particularly wise. But we discussed amongst ourselves what it meant. How should one evaluate such a thing?

David immediately said it would be inconceivable in America to go into a restaurant or a café and find sitting just a few tables away Bush in conversation with Condoleezza Rice. That is inconceivable in the US. It is not simply another style of politics. It means that even the political elite in Germany underestimate the international situation. They are not at all conscious about how far the political situation has already progressed on a

worldwide scale. They have little conception of what the American government is really preparing in order to implement their policy of world hegemony.

This danger of underestimating the speed of events is also of significance for our own work. We too have lived in a period of relatively slow political development and relative economic and social stability. I don't want to say that all the cuts simply began when the "Red-Red" state government took office in Berlin. No, the social decline has continued for some time. But there are always sharp turns in social developments, and we are now at such a turning point. The political situation is constantly worsening, governments are moving to the right, the general population is moving in the opposite direction.

Under these conditions, we must go very consciously onto the political offensive. The most important instrument to do this is the *World Socialist Web Site*. Through the daily analyses we publish, we direct the attention of the working class to the most important changes in the political situation worldwide. But even more, the *World Socialist Web Site* is the instrument around which the construction of a new political party is taking shape.

And so I am back to the starting point of my contribution. We will concentrate much work in the coming weeks and months on the building of our party as a world party. The coming development of the working class will primarily be a political and secondly an international question.

If you look back over the past period, or rather the entire twentieth century, which brought two world wars, fascism and the Holocaust, then the question arises, why wasn't the working class able to prevent all this? The most important reason is that the workers' movement was still very strongly shaped by the nation state. In a certain sense, the nation state dragged the working class behind itself.

Globalisation has removed the ground from beneath this national policy. Therefore, the entire old workers' movement is breaking down. The *World Socialist Web Site* is the instrument to again develop the workers' movement on an international socialist basis and I call on you to actively participate in this.

*Concluded*



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