

Statement of German SEP: Fight against job and welfare cuts requires an international socialist perspective

Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The following statement is being distributed at nationwide demonstrations in Germany against welfare cuts on October 21.

The day of action called by the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB) is marked by an obvious contradiction: while millions are increasingly worried about the prospect of unemployment, welfare cuts and poverty, the speeches at today's demonstrations will be given by people who are to a large extent responsible for the growing social misery.

The majority of union officials occupy posts on the leading committees of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), have supported all of the anti-social policies of Germany's former SPD-Green government, and support the current grand coalition between Germany's conservative parties and the SPD. The very same union officials calling for a "socially just policy" at the demonstrations will participate over the next few days in meetings of the SPD Executive Committee with Labour Minister Franz Müntefering and Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück to discuss the form and extent of further welfare cuts.

While the chairman of the public service trade union Verdi, Frank Bsirske, is a member of the Green Party, he plays a similar role. Bsirske is an especially odious example of the cynicism which prevails within the executive bodies of the unions. He has approved contracts for public service workers which involve drastic cuts in wages, longer working hours and harsher working conditions. The introduction of new low-wage jobs and the latest contract agreed by Verdi for public service workers undermine the previous structure of collective bargaining agreements and make it possible for public service employers to further gut social conditions.

In a deal struck with the Berlin Senate (headed by a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism) Bsirske imposed a 10 percent wage cut for public transport workers. When hospital doctors took strike action last spring, Verdi functioned as a strike-breaker and joined public employers in slandering the striking physicians.

The role played by Germany's biggest industrial union, IG Metall, is similar. At major companies such as Volkswagen, Opel and Siemens the union has been instrumental in imposing contracts involving wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

The unions are complicit in a conspiracy against the working population which is spearheaded by the grand coalition of

Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and Franz Müntefering (SPD). There is a direct connection between government job market "reforms" and the regressive contracts agreed by the unions.

The introduction of the Hartz IV laws by the former SPD-Green government means that even highly skilled workers and technicians confront a rapid decline in their living conditions—to the level of social welfare recipients—should they lose their job. The fear of such a drastic social decline is then exploited by the unions to impose even more regressive contracts in both the industrial and public service sectors.

At the same time, the unions seek to contain growing resistance to their policies and prevent a social explosion. This is the main purpose of the current day of action.

The most important task confronting workers is to draw a political balance sheet. For many, today's demonstration will not be the first protest actions in which they have participated. There has been a succession of protests and strikes over the past few years and there has been no lack of militancy or readiness to resist the anti-social measures introduced by the government.

There has also been a marked increase in criticism and discontent with the SPD, the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism and the unions, reflected in huge losses in membership for the SPD (40 percent since 1991) and a halving of the vote for the Left Party in the recent Senate elections in Berlin.

It is not sufficient, however, merely to turn one's back on the SPD and Left Party and deny them support. It is necessary to break with their program of social reformism and take up a new, socialist perspective.

There are objective causes for the turn to the right by the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions. In the 1960s and 1970s such organizations were able to achieve some social improvements within the capitalist framework. Now, however, fundamental changes in world economy have removed the basis for such policies.

Today's economy is controlled by transnational corporations and international financial interests that scour the globe for cheap labor, low taxes and control of raw materials, and play off one country against the other. The rock-bottom level of wages in China has become the measure for countries all over the world. Anything remotely resembling a "fair" distribution of the gross national

product between so-called “social partners” within the national framework is no longer possible under conditions where finance and investment can be diverted overnight to countries with lower taxes and wages.

The reaction of the SPD, the Left Party and the unions to this development is to close ranks even further with corporate interests. They undertake responsibility for defending the “industrial site of Germany” and improving the “international competitiveness” of German companies, support welfare cuts, divide workers internationally and play off one section against the other. The more social divisions intensify, the more determinedly they align themselves with big business and preach the identity of interests between workers and capitalists.

The consequences can be seen in the intensification of the social crisis and increasing political decay in Germany. While the SPD, Left Party and trade unions are active in implementing social and welfare cuts, despair and political frustration are developing amongst those hardest hit, creating conditions which can be exploited by extreme-right demagogues. The recent entry of the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD) into the Mecklenburg-Pomerania state parliament is a clear signal of this growing danger.

In light of this situation, it is necessary to spell out some basic truths. For many decades the SPD and the unions have rejected a revolutionary transformation of society, arguing that social conflicts and divisions could be overcome through a form of “social partnership” and reliance on the German Constitution, which states, “Property entails obligations. Its use shall also serve the public good.” Even today, highly paid party and union officials seek to lull workers to sleep with the fairy tale of a “social free-market economy.”

The only opponents of this standpoint were Marxists who insisted on the irreconcilable gulf between antagonistic social classes. Today, however, the class character of society is visible for all. The insufferable arrogance and presumption with which figures like Deutsche Bank Chairman Josef Ackermann and other leading executives multiply their salaries while imposing mass redundancies and factory closures, coupled with tax handouts to the rich and welfare cuts for the rest, is a provocation against the whole of the working population.

A social rebellion is brewing under the surface of political life. While trade union bureaucrats and politicians warn of such a social explosion, we in the Socialist Equality Party see our task as preparing and directing such a development in a progressive direction—because a mass rebellion is inevitable and necessary. It is only the conscious and independent intervention of millions of workers into political life that will put an end to the avaricious and self-serving interests that dominate political and economic development.

We oppose the growing social crisis and capitalist anarchy with our own independent program, which is based on the needs of the population. Such a program incorporates three essential components:

First, society must place the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business. This means taking up the struggle for a socialist perspective. The interests of the large majority of the population are incompatible with a social system based on the

private ownership of the means of production and the national state. The social crisis cannot be overcome within the framework of existing capitalist conditions.

The social question is inseparably connected with the fight for the defense of democratic rights and against militarism and war. There can be no talk of genuine democracy under conditions where social wealth remains concentrated in few hands, workers are denied any role in the organization of their daily working lives, the press and media remain under the control of big companies, and education and culture reduced to a privilege for a small elite.

Second, the attacks on social and democratic rights cannot be combated merely through demonstrations and “pressure from the roots.” It is necessary to build a *political* movement entirely independently of the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions. A new party must be built.

Third, such a political reorientation of the working class must be firmly centered on an international perspective. Not a single social problem can be solved within the limits of a regional or national framework.

The divisive politics of the trade unions, which play off one country or one section of workers against another, must be rejected. Instead of allowing themselves to be used as pawns against one another, workers in Germany must accept responsibility for their colleagues in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world and unite on an international basis.

We oppose a European Union based on the interests of the big banks and major companies and put forward our own program for a United Socialist States of Europe based on the unification of the continent by working people.

As the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Party is able to rest on a huge body of historical experience. The Fourth International is living proof that there is a Marxist alternative to social democracy and Stalinism.

We turn to all those who reject the reactionary policies of the grand coalition and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy. It is high time to break with illusions in a turn to the left by the old reformist bureaucracies and take up the task of building a new revolutionary party.

Contact the Socialist Equality Party! Come to our meetings! Read the daily German *World Socialist Web Site* at the Internet address: www.wsws.org/de.



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