

ISSE to hold first meeting in Vienna

Our correspondent
15 June 2007

On Sunday, June 17, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) is holding its first-ever meeting in the Austrian capital of Vienna. The meeting offers Austrian readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and others an opportunity to discuss a socialist answer to the crisis of global capitalism with representatives of the ISSE.

A team has been working for the meeting since Monday, distributing leaflets at information tables. At the centre of the leaflet and many discussions are the issues of war and growing militarism—in particular, the war in Iraq and preparations for a military strike against Iran.

As was the case in Germany, the workers' movement in Austria was dominated after the Second World War by the influence of social democracy and the reformist trade unions. The Austrian ruling elite was only able to retain power by making considerable social concessions to the working class.

This enabled the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the trade unions to exert considerable political influence. Apart from a four-year period (1966-1970), the SPÖ was a partner in every postwar government, often in a coalition with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). The SPÖ was not only an important political factor but also—due to sweeping nationalisations and an extensive welfare state—a significant economic entity in the Alpine republic. The party worked closely with the trade unions, and over time, a dense mesh of relations and dependency developed between the two organisations.

Various radical petty bourgeois organisations grew up and agitated on the fringes of the SPÖ and unions with a programme that generally amounted to putting pressure on these organisations in order to push them to the left and carry out reforms in the interest of the working class—an increasingly vain and illusory project. Under such conditions, it was very difficult for a

genuine Marxist alternative to develop in Austria.

Political relations in Austria remained relatively stable as long as the domination of the SPD was bound up with concessions to the working class. In the 1980s, however, the social democrats increasingly began to implement policies aimed at reversing the gains and reforms of previous years. This enabled right-wing populists in the form of the Austrian Freedom Party, led by the demagogue Jörg Haider, to emerge and finally enter a coalition with the ÖVP in 2000.

Following seven years of opposition, the SPÖ reentered government in January in a grand coalition with the ÖVP, and SPÖ leader Alfred Gusenbauer was appointed chancellor. Gusenbauer began his term in office by beginning where his SPÖ predecessor had left off in 1999, by breaking his most important election promises—on this occasion, the withdrawal of student fees for public universities and the cancellation of new Euro-fighter jets for billions of euros.

This opportunism on the part of the SPÖ has left its mark, particularly on students whose conscious political life had been dominated up to now by the right-wing coalition of the ÖVP and Freedom Party. In the course of its campaign, the ISSE team has failed to meet a single student with anything positive to say about the current government. The question of an independent perspective, through which workers and young people can defend their interests independently from the old reformist apparatuses, is posed in all its sharpness in Austria.

The socialist perspective of the ISSE has been met with considerable interest. Many students agreed that the struggle against war requires a struggle against the capitalist system and indicated they would attend the meeting on Sunday. Amongst those expressing interest in the meeting were students from Slovakia, Germany and Switzerland.

One student from Slovakia reported on the social

decline that had taken place in his homeland since the reintroduction of capitalism. He expressed great interest in the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism.

Christina from Austria was convinced that the real reasons for the launching of the Iraq war and the occupation of the country by a US-led coalition were oil and world power. European powers, including those that refused to send troops to Iraq, were not idly standing by but had undertaken their own initiatives, including sending troops to Afghanistan. She saw a direct connection between militarism and attacks on the social state: “There is always enough money for weapons and armaments while at the same time cuts are made in education—although education is decisive for the development of society.”

“Capitalism is an octopus, which is forever extending its reach. We need an alternative,” Christina said. “My orientation is definitely green and socialist. The current trend of development is disastrous. Let’s hope we can achieve something.”

She was unclear whether there was anything to be gained from protest politics. “I do not know, I am not so sure. Despite all the protest in Germany, the politicians still do what they want. Still, I think it is important to defend oneself even if it does not change anything directly.”

Christina’s friend Simone was also of the opinion that the Iraq war was driven by economic interests: “America and Bush are not interested in the fact that we are opposed to them. The most we can achieve is that our own governments do not get involved. But our governments are continually telling us lies. Look at how former German chancellor Schröder posed as an opponent to the Iraq war, and later it came out that he had been supporting the war the whole time from behind the scenes.”

When asked about the current Austrian government, Simone replied: “During the election campaign, they just told lies, anything they thought would help them get elected. Students only voted for the SPÖ because they had promised to withdraw student fees. Now, we are being told that we should be happy they are not being increased. It’s a shame there have been no demonstrations. We are living in a democracy in which the people no longer have any say. We can only vote, and everyone tells us lies. You cannot call this democracy anymore.”

ISSE meeting
June 17 at 15:00 p.m.
Amerlinghaus, Stiftgasse 8, Vienna



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