

Germany: PSG holds first election meeting in Hesse

Our correspondents
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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) held its first meeting last week in Frankfurt-Main as part of its campaign for the Hesse state elections in January 2008. The meeting took place near Frankfurt University, where PSG supporters had been campaigning, and had held many interesting and lengthy discussions.

Helmut Arens, who heads the PSG's statewide slate, began his remarks to the meeting with a report about these discussions and the experiences of the past week. "The most significant response we encountered in our campaign was the vast anger with official politics," he stressed, adding that this anger was quite understandable given the political record of the state legislature.

Arens detailed the right-wing and reactionary politics of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) state premier Roland Koch, who came to office in 1999 following a xenophobic and demagogic campaign against allowing longstanding immigrants dual nationality. "Since that time there have been substantial cuts in social programmes; job cuts and the closure of social facilities are on the agenda. One thing that stands out is the introduction of the so-called 'Wisconsin model,' which forces the unemployed to accept any job they are offered, no matter how poorly paid, or face cuts in their benefits."

However, mounting opposition and discontent in the general population meant the Koch administration could not have introduced its anti-social policies without the tacit support of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). "The SPD is not perceived as an alternative to Koch, quite the opposite, it is met with deep distrust. And rightfully so," Arens said. Even if the SPD's lead candidate, Andrea Ypsilanti, tries to put on a left face, everyone in this city and in this state knows "that her party is in a grand coalition with the CDU in Berlin."

Arens stressed that this also applies to the Greens, who previously enjoyed significant influence in Frankfurt—and particularly in this district near the university. "When the Green Party sat in the federal government with the SPD in Berlin, they implemented the harshest welfare cuts in the history of post-war Germany." These former pacifists have become the most vehement proponents of war, "and now they even favour a coalition with the CDU," Arens said, adding that the present alliance between the CDU and the Greens in the Frankfurt city government was symbolic of this intention.

"And what about the Left Party?" the PSG candidate asked, referring to the organisation that was recently formed as an amalgamation of the ex-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism and the Election Alternative (WASG), and is now headed by former SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine. Arens reported that many of the discussions over the past days had revolved around this question; time and again, the argument could be heard that the Left Party can be used to exert

pressure on the SPD and push it to the left. "Anyone who believes this is in for a bitter disappointment," Arens said. The Left Party does not represent a pressure from the left, nor will the SPD allow itself to be pushed to the left.

One need only look to Berlin in order to see that the opposite is the case. In the Berlin city legislature, the Left Party supports the SPD in order to push through the dismantling of social and democratic rights. "How credible can a party be that in its Hesse election programme promises many fine things—the abolition of low-wage jobs, state-financed social programmes, shorter working hours—but where it forms part of the government it does exactly the opposite?"

Arens stressed that the Left Party in Hesse had already offered its services to the SPD—but that a so-called "red-red" or "red-red-green" government in the state capital Wiesbaden would represent just as little progress as the red-red city legislature in Berlin.

Arens closed his speech saying, "This is why the most important message in the Hesse election campaign is in the first sentence of our manifesto, which reads: 'There is a party that it is worth joining and fighting for—the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit!'"

Ulrich Rippert, the PSG chairman, then took up this point and stressed that many people were very concerned about the condition of society today. The unrestrained accumulation of wealth by those at the top—the super profits paid to shareholders and the million dollar salaries of the top managers—while simultaneously the vast majority face wage cuts and worsening conditions, is increasingly being met by rejection and anger.

"However, it is not enough to point the finger at the irresponsibility of the top managers and politicians. It is necessary to recognize and act upon one's own responsibility," stressed Rippert, who then explained how the PSG election programme is aimed at enabling working people to intervene in political developments and to fundamentally change social conditions.

He quoted a paragraph from the PSG's manifesto for the Hesse election, "Without the active intervention of broad sections of the population into political developments nothing will change. Social misery will get worse. The decay of democracy is already giving rise to the spectres of racism and nationalism. History has shown where this leads. It cannot be accepted that a corrupt elite can continue to plunder society, driving it to ruin and social catastrophe."

Rippert stressed that the fight against social misery must begin by conscientiously drawing up a political balance sheet. "It is necessary to look reality in the eye," he said, and quoted an article that had just appeared in *Spiegel Online*. Under the headline, "Alarm Bells Ring on the Stock Exchange," the article goes on to say, "No one has put it any more clearly: 'The US economy is confronting a recession...'"

Europe could also be drawn into the vortex by the worldwide credit crisis. In Asia, shares are collapsing everywhere.”

Rippert described how the American credit crisis has developed in a very short time into an international financial crisis with completely unpredictable and catastrophic consequences. “Those who believe they will escape this development because they do not own any shares and therefore have nothing to lose should look at the situation in the German state of Saxony, in order to see they are making an enormous mistake,” Rippert said.

He reported how the Saxony Landesbank (state bank) had become involved in speculative dealings with American property loans, and just a few weeks ago faced collapse. “An express action saw the institution taken over by the Baden-Württemberg Landesbank in Stuttgart. Last week, a commission of experts established that the losses amounted to an unbelievable sum of €43 billion. Whereupon the Stuttgart Landesbank demanded the Saxony state legislature provide an underwriting of €2.75 billion.”

This means that the speculative losses are being shifted from parts of a financial oligarchy directly onto the wider population, who will have to pay the bill through austerity measures and social cuts, said Rippert. There were two tendencies arising from the international financial crisis: Firstly, the social crisis was taking extreme forms worldwide. Secondly, the conflict over energy supplies, geopolitical power and influence was sharpening between the great powers. As a reaction to the growing crisis in the US, Germany and Europe are intensively stepping up their military armaments programmes.

Rippert pointed out how resistance to this was developing throughout Europe. He explained the connections between the German engine drivers’ strike and the strike wave in France, and made clear that workers are confronted everywhere with the fact that the social democratic parties and trade unions have moved sharply to the right.

“The Left Party is part of this rightward development by the social reformist bureaucracy,” he said, and added, “The glaring contradiction between what the Left Party is calling for in this election campaign and what it is actually doing in Berlin, where it is part of the city legislature, is directly bound up with the worsening financial crisis. The globalization of production and the omnipotence of a finance oligarchy have undermined the previous policy of social reconciliation and have transformed all those parties that stand for the bourgeois order into vehement opponents of the working class.”

This is why the building of an international, socialist party, which stands in the revolutionary traditions of the working class, is of such a crucial importance, Rippert stressed. This question stands at the heart of the PSG’s election programme: “Just as capitalism is returning to forms of extreme exploitation, militarism and war, so also must the working class return to its revolutionary traditions. The technological innovations in the fields of computing, telecommunications and transportation technology, which form the basis for the global integration of production, also make possible an enormous increase in human productivity. They create the means to overcome poverty and backwardness around the world and to improve the general conditions of life for all.

“However, this requires a revolutionary transformation of society, in order to liberate the productive forces from the chains of private property and to place the needs of the population at the very centre of social developments.”

A central topic in the discussion that followed was the evaluation of the Left Party. One participant said it was wrong to condemn the Left

Party “as a whole.” The rank-and-file of the Left Party were frequently at odds with the leadership, she said. For example, many members supported the engine drivers’ strike and did not agree with the statements of party leader Gregor Gysi.

In answer, it was said that Gysi’s rejection of the engine drivers’ central demand for their own contract and his defence of the Transnet trade union, which functions openly as a strike-breaking force, reflected the political line of the party. The fact that so many members held a different opinion only shows how undemocratic this party is. Members should ask themselves why they are in this party.

“Those who join a political party also take responsibility for its politics,” Rippert said. They can’t then make the excuse that they personally hold another opinion.

The left-wing rhetoric of the Left Party serves exclusively to cover over its tracks. It is seeking to capture the growing opposition in the population and to orient this back into the SPD.

Another person put forward the argument that the Left Party was necessary in order to create “left-wing alliances,” and without such alliances the “political climate” cannot be changed.

Rippert answered this as follows: “Particularly in a city such as Frankfurt—in which very many groups exist that call themselves left-wing, revolutionary, or socialist, and which are now all gathered together in or around the Left Party—it is important to make clear that we represent a position that is the opposite of all these groups. All these groups try to prevent the true character of the Left Party becoming visible to all.

“They are trying to develop a ‘broad left’ movement in which all those disappointed and frustrated lefts can have a home—the political remnants of the splits from the SPD, the Pabloites, the radicals, ex-radicals and left-radicals, and so on. To establish a so-called ‘left majority,’ they untiringly search for left-wing currents in the trade unions, the SPD or the Left Party. The result of this work always comes to the same thing: the working class is subordinated to the old Stalinist, social-democratic and reformist bureaucracies.

“We represent exactly the opposite. For us, the political independence of the working class is the decisive question. That is, we fight for a conscious political break with the SPD, the Left Party and the all the rest that congregate in the periphery of these bureaucracies. The future of society will not be decided by ‘left majorities’ in parliament at the state or federal level, but in the living struggle of social classes. Therefore, the view of Marxists is always that the political independence of the working class is the crucial factor that will actually change the political balance of power, insofar as the working class can act as an independent and politically conscious class.

Rippert stressed, “It is on this that our work is concentrated, in the building of the PSG.”

The meeting in Frankfurt was the prelude to an intensive election campaign, with public meetings planned in several cities throughout Hesse. In conclusion, there was an impressive collection for the PSG election fund.



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