

ISSE lecture tour of six German universities

Our correspondent
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Under the title “1968: The Lessons for Today,” the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) carried out a very successful series of meetings at German universities during the past two months. A total of over 250 students and workers participated in the ISSE meetings held in Frankfurt, Berlin, Essen, Leipzig, Karlsruhe and Würzburg.

In preparation for the meetings, members of the ISSE distributed thousands of leaflets and put up hundreds of posters on campuses. The leaflets pointed out that the movement of 1968 was not simply a revolt on the part of German students, but was rather an international offensive by workers, which rocked the capitalist system. At the heart of the meetings was the issue of the lessons to be drawn today from the events of four decades ago.

The meetings were opened with a lecture by Peter Schwarz. Schwarz is a member of the international editorial board of the WSWS and the executive committee of the Social Equality Party in Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). Schwarz dealt first with the question of why the events of 1968 evoked such a broad interest today. He explained that against a background of enormous social polarisation, a dramatic aggravation of the international finance crisis, the spread of wars and increasing militarism, popular discontent was growing, and there were indications of the emergence of a broad grassroots movement similar to that which emerged in the 1960s.

“That is the principal reason for the interest in the events of 1968,” Schwarz declared. “They could be repeated in another form. The ruling elite is attempting to prepare for such an eventuality, and we should draw the lessons from those events in order to make our own preparations.”

In the first part of his lecture, Schwarz concentrated on the events of May/June 1968 in France. Within the space of a few months, what began as a relatively innocuous dispute between students and the government developed into the biggest strike movement in the history of the country, posing a real threat to the rule of General Charles de Gaulle. An estimated 10 million workers took part in the strike. The government was paralysed, and the trade unions had lost control of the movement.

At the end of May 1968, the fate of de Gaulle and his government lay in the hands of the French Communist Party (PCF) and its affiliated trade union—the CGT (Confédération générale du travail—General Confederation of Workers). They were the principal political factors that secured de Gaulle’s political survival and saved the Fifth Republic. On May 27, they agreed on the Grenelle Contract with the government, which allowed for wage increases and secured the right of trade union representation in the factories. Although the PCF and CGT called for a resumption of work, many workers remained on strike. It was only on May 30, when de Gaulle announced new elections, that the PCF and CGT were able to regain some ground.

Schwarz described the scene graphically: “The CGT now used all its energy to terminate the strikes and occupations before the planned new elections. This was not easy, but gradually the strike front began to crumble, workforces returned following the concluding of new contracts, and the most militant layers were increasingly isolated. At the same time, the police began clearing the universities. The country remained turbulent during the following months and years, but the opportunity for workers to

seize political power had been lost.”

In the first weeks of May, the right-wing Gaullist camp found itself increasingly paralysed and isolated. Gradually, however, it was able to recover the initiative with the assistance of the PCF and CGT. The Gaullists then conducted an election campaign based on fear and began an offensive against workers and students. On May 31, Interior Minister Christian Fouchet was replaced by Raymond Marcellin. Prior to this appointment, French national television had been subjected to massive censorship; foreign channels that had reported on the demonstrations and strikes were closed down. On June 12, Marcellin banned all street demonstrations, dissolved a number of left-wing organisations and parties, and deported more than 200 “suspect” foreigners.

“The election proved to be a disaster for the left,” Schwarz concluded. “The Gaullists won 59 percent of the vote, while the FGDS [Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste—Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left] of Francois Mitterrand and the PCF could gain only 19 percent combined. In particular, conservative rural areas voted by a large majority for the right. Two months after the start of the revolutionary crisis, the ruling elite once again had its grasp on the instruments of power. It now had time to replace de Gaulle and develop a new political vehicle to maintain control over the working class and secure its rule in the coming decades. This mechanism was the Socialist Party founded by Francois Mitterrand in 1971.”

Nominally Trotskyist organisations such as the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) and the OCI (Organisation Communiste Internationaliste—Internationalist Communist Organisation), along with anarchist and Maoist groups, avoided any real conflict with the PCF. Instead of challenging the PCF and fighting for a revolutionary perspective amongst workers, they largely left the Stalinists in charge and workers to their own devices.

In the second part of his lecture, Schwarz examined the theories of the New Left that were influential in the development of the student movement in Germany—in particular, the Frankfurt School. He explained: “The term ‘New Left’ distinguished it from ‘Old Left,’ i.e., social-democracy and Stalinism, but characteristically it ignored the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism. Trotsky had criticised Stalinism from the standpoint of classical Marxism. He demonstrated that the Stalinist bureaucracy had betrayed Marxism and falsified socialism. The New Left, however, accused the Stalinists of dogmatism—and thereby made classical Marxism responsible for the Stalinist degeneration.”

The theories of the New Left had little to do with Marxism. Such theorists laid stress on the problem of alienation, which they understand primarily from a psychological angle rather than from the standpoint of exploitation. Based on their analysis, they then concluded that the process of liberation is not primarily through socio-political transformation, but rather a matter of doing away with alienation through changes in the environment and everyday life—in the sphere of sexual, familial and social relations. As a result, cultural and social change on the part of individuals became the prerequisite for any transformation of society. In addition, the force for social change was no longer the working class, but rather an elite of intellectuals and/or groups on the fringe of society.

“We are dealing here with a thoroughly subjective standpoint,” Schwarz declared. “At its heart is the individual, his perceptions, feelings and state of being. The revolution is not a product of contradictions in a society divided into classes, but instead the product of critical thinking and the activity of an enlightened elite. The aim of revolution is not the transformation of the relations of power and the ownership of property, but rather changes of social, cultural and sexual habits.

“Indeed, such cultural changes are even made the precondition for revolution. The revolution is shifted from the objective sphere of society to the subjective realm of the individual. Instead of acknowledging the working class as a revolutionary class, the New Left regarded workers as a backward mass that had been integrated into the system via consumption and was dominated by the media. Some theorists, such as Herbert Marcuse, even went so far as to declare the working class to be a potential base for fascism.”

Such standpoints were widespread in the radical student movement SDS (Sozialistischen Deutschen Studentenbund—German Socialist Student Alliance). In particular, the wing of the SDS around Rudi Dutschke and Hans Jürgen Krahel based itself on the theories of the New Left.

Schwarz explained that in September 1967, Dutschke and Krahel gave a joint address to a delegate conference of the SDS. Their paper, which was entirely in line with the theories of the Frankfurt School, declared that due to manipulation by the state, the masses no longer “possessed the capability of revolt. The self-organisation of their interests and needs had therefore become historically impossible.” Instead, the task of illuminating society was left to active minorities. This process of enlightenment has the aim of transforming “the abstract violence of the system into sensory certainty.” Or as Krahel later declared, “We meant that only fringe groups, intellectuals, privileged fringe groups could act on behalf of the working class and establish a sort of revolution of mankind, without seeking to initiate any kind of class differentiation.”

The theories of the New Left encouraged students to reject the working class and leave them in the hands of the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies. The results of this adaptation could be clearly seen in the events in France. Schwarz closed his remarks by formulating two of the central lessons from the events of 1968:

“Firstly, they demonstrate that the working class is the social force that has the potential to overcome capitalism. It may often appear conservative at a surface level. But the contradictions of capitalist society force it into violent conflict.

“Secondly, the events of 1968 reinforce the significance of the political and theoretical struggle for a socialist perspective. It was the predominance of the theories of the New Left combined with the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and social democracy that enabled the bourgeoisie to regain control of a revolutionary situation and stabilise its rule in 1968.”

All of the lectures were followed by a host of questions and intense discussion. In Frankfurt and other universities, some students sought to defend the positions of the New Left. Based on conditions of “consumer terror” and media manipulation, one student asked, how could workers develop their revolutionary potential? In Berlin, one participant asked whether the establishment of a new party was the correct response to the failure of the 1968 movement. Was it not better, he stated, to rely on the spontaneous actions of the masses? In Leipzig, one student declared the correct response to a similar crisis today was to develop the broadest possible alliance of all left forces.

In response to these questions, representatives of the ISSE explained that it was necessary to understand revolution as an objective process. Despite media manipulation and a barrage of government propaganda, violent conflicts between the majority of the population and the ruling elite were inevitable. This was very apparent in the events of May/June 1968 in France. Just as the New Left was declaring that the working class

had been thoroughly integrated into the capitalist system, class conflicts exploded with enormous force.

At the same time, the events in France made clear that it was insufficient to rely on the spontaneous development of workers. The fact that class conflict is inevitable does not mean that such conflicts automatically lead to revolution. Even when such events serve to unravel illusions in reform and any confidence in the bureaucracies, such illusions can only be finally and effectively countered by a scientific understanding of society and its development.

The task of a revolutionary movement in France in 1968 would have been to expose the role of the PCF/CGT and build a Trotskyist party based on the struggle for a socialist perspective in the working class. This requires first and foremost an analysis of concrete economic and political developments and revealing the objective contradictions of capitalism. On this basis, it is then possible to evaluate the significance of various political and social tendencies in the course of developing a revolutionary perspective.

ISSE members explained that this was precisely the task of the ISSE today. Marius Heuser stated in Leipzig: “Our aim is not to found yet another protest group, which runs across the campus with placards and shouts loud slogans but is then overwhelmed by events when genuine social conflicts erupt. In setting out to build the ISSE as an international student organisation, we base ourselves on the lessons we have discussed today. Based on a study of the history of the twentieth century and an analysis of objective social development, our aim is to enable workers to unleash their revolutionary potential and overcome capitalism.”

In the east German city of Leipzig, the ISSE lecture was followed by a lively discussion over the issue: To what extent did a relationship exist between the 1968 movement and the revolts in Eastern Europe against the Stalinist regimes. Those in attendance referred to the close relationship between the political revolution in the east and the social revolution in the west. The overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy by the workers in Eastern Europe would have immediately led to an intensification of class conflicts internationally, while successful revolutions in Western Europe would have seriously shaken the power of the bureaucracy. It was precisely because the Stalinists were so aware of this threat that they did everything in their power to suffocate such revolutionary movements as that which took place in France.

In the course of the lecture series, the ISSE was able to win a number of contacts and plans further meetings on political, historical and philosophical questions for the forthcoming semester.



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