German Socialist Equality Party certified for 2009 federal election

Our reporter
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At its meeting on July 17, Germany's Federal Election Committee agreed to allow the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) to stand in September's national elections, but only after a lengthy dispute.

The committee rejected the applications of no less than 31 organizations from a total of 52 parties applying to take part in the elections. The 52 applications represented the highest total ever. Amongst the parties that were turned down were a number that had stood candidates in previous elections to the German parliament, the Bundestag.

The PSG had fulfilled all of the legal conditions for obtaining ballot status. It had met the deadline for producing state lists, minutes of regional conferences at which candidates were nominated, affidavits confirming the procedure of the conferences, official certificates on the eligibility of the party's candidates, and declarations of consent by the candidates. All of these documents had been presented to the appropriate state election officials.

In addition, the PSG had collected and presented more than the necessary 2,000 valid signatures showing support for its state lists. Each of these signatures was confirmed by the appropriate registration office.

The chairman of the nine-member Federal Election Committee, Roderich Egeler, initially declared that while the PSG had satisfactorily fulfilled the “formal” conditions for taking part in the elections, he had considerable doubts whether the party satisfied “material” conditions.

He could not deny that the PSG had stood candidates on a number of occasions in previous years and had sought to gain political support. However, he said, based on the limited response as well as the small membership of the party, its right to stand candidates had to be seriously questioned.

The chairman of the PSG, Ulrich Rippert, argued vigorously against Egeler's objections. Rippert stressed that the legal requirement to take part in the election was based on collecting several thousand certified support signatures. The PSG had satisfactorily fulfilled this requirement in previous Bundestag and state elections, and more recently in the European election held in June.

“We invariably presented far more support signatures than required in order to clearly demonstrate the level of our support in the population,” Rippert explained.

In response to a remark by the federal returning officer that the PSG had received less than 0.5 percent of the vote in the European election, the PSG chairman replied that this comment misrepresented the significance of the vote. “In the European elections we received around 10,000 votes. That is not an insignificant figure,” Rippert said. He added, “One can naturally accuse us of failing to gain as many votes as the other parties. That is, however, no basis for preventing us from taking part in the election.”

Rippert then explained that the work of the PSG was not restricted to election campaigns. “We do not merely participate in elections,” he said. “We produce a daily Internet publication called the *World Socialist Web Site*, which deals with important political, economic and cultural events. We also publish a printed magazine called *Gleichheit*. The magazine appears bimonthly and is available in many book shops and kiosks. We also organize regular public political meetings on all important social questions. A number of our election meetings in Berlin and other cities drew audiences that exceeded those of the so-called established parties.”

When asked how it was possible to sustain this level of activity with a relatively small membership, Rippert explained that the PSG placed considerably greater demands on its members than other parties. “We do not have any political corpses in our party,” he said. “The members of the PSG devote most of their spare time to political work. In addition, we have a broad circle of sympathizers who energetically support the work of the PSG.”

Rippert stressed that there could not be any doubt about the PSG’s level of participation in political life. He made it clear that the PSG would respond to its being kept off the ballot by the election committee with all the political and legal means at its disposal.

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Egeler then proposed that the PSG be allowed to take part in the election, and his proposal was unanimously agreed by the rest of the committee.

The stance taken by the Federal Election Committee at its meeting raises a number of questions. The statement that the committee is not limited to checking formal criteria, i.e., legal conditions, for participation in an election, but also so-called "material conditions" including votes previously gained is an expression of bureaucratic arbitrariness.

The committee is bound by the German constitution (the Basic Law), the Federal Electoral Law and the Political Parties Act. Article 21 of the Basic Law reads, "The political parties participate in the forming of the political will of the people. They may be freely established. Their internal organization shall conform to democratic principles. They shall publicly account for the sources of their funds and for their assets."

Paragraph 18 of the Federal Electoral law specifies which organizations can take part in an election and under what conditions. There is no mention of any necessity to have obtained a certain number of votes in previous elections. The only criterion laid down is the requirement for parties to collect signatures in order to demonstrate the extent of their public support.

It is not the job of the election committee to draw conclusions from the number of votes gained or lost by parties. If this were the case, one would have to seriously question the eligibility of the Social Democratic Party, which has suffered massive defeats in a series of elections in recent years.

The arrogant and dismissive attitude of the election committee towards basic democratic rights and its attempt to determine the fate of parties by giving a thumbs-up or -down—in the manner of a feudal lord—is an indication of how the German state will react to coming social conflicts.

Many people are openly hostile to official politics and the way in which different parties agree and implement basically the same pro-business policies. They are seeking to become independently active and intervene with their own political formations in political life. The state sees this basic democratic striving as a threat and a sign of resistance.

Thus, several parties that seek to raise social issues were denied certification. Amongst these were the Greys (Die Grauen), which seeks to represent the interests of pensioners and has participated in elections for many years; the PASS party, an advocate of the unemployed and socially disadvantaged; the Social Alternative for Justice (SAG); and the anarchist Pogo party, which has also taken part in election campaigns for several years.

The PSG will utilise the election to encourage discussion around a socialist program aimed at giving a clear and progressive political orientation to the growing wave of opposition to the established parties.

The current election campaign has the character of a political conspiracy by all of the official parties, which are working together to conceal the true extent of the economic and social crisis, while preparing huge attacks on the social and democratic rights of the population. The government that will come to power in the autumn—irrespective of its composition—will implement draconian measures aimed at shifting the burden of the economic crisis onto the shoulders of the working class.

Industrial production is currently decreasing at a dramatic rate, and unemployment is growing at record speed. Under the surface, an enormous social storm is brewing.

The PSG wrote in its election manifesto for last month's European election, "We see our task as preparing and politically directing such a storm in a progressive direction. We want to lay the basis for a socialist mass movement that can smash the power of capital and establish workers' governments.

"We stand in a powerful historical tradition. As the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the PSG embodies the continuity of the Trotskyist movement, which has defended Marxism against Stalinism and social democracy under the most difficult circumstances. We collaborate closely with the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, as well as our co-thinkers throughout Europe, the US, Asia and Australia."

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