

The PSG and the German Left Party: An exchange of letters

Peter Schwarz
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Below is a letter from a reader concerning the attitude of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) to the German Left Party and various middle-class organizations on its periphery, followed by a reply by Peter Schwarz.

Dear people,

I would gladly support the PSG. Actually, I agree with everything you have published. However, I have two questions:

1) What is the position of the PSG regarding the other “Trotskyist” groups, in particular, the SAV and the former Linksruck? Why is it not possible to collaborate with them?

2) Why was the result of the PSG in the European election talked up? Isn’t it rather obvious that the PSG did not attract much notice, at least from voters? Why can’t such a bad result be taken as the occasion for a critical look at strategy? (With a two-thirds loss in relation to the last election, it was quite a disaster—particularly given that the PSG probably spent more this time than ever before.)

I do not want to say that this election was somehow significant, but to try and derive something positive from the result seems to me wishful thinking.

With best greetings and solidarity,

F.S.

* * *

Dear F.S.,

Naturally, we are pleased when there is agreement with the politics of the PSG. In your case, however, we have substantial doubts that you actually agree with “everything” that we have published. Even if you do not express it openly, your letter amounts to a call for us to join the Left Party, or at least collaborate with it. We reject this categorically.

You will certainly know that both the SAV and the former Linksruck work within the Left Party. The German supporters of the Militant tendency and the Tony Cliff tendency are members of the party of Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. This party, in the words of one of their spokespersons, is the “start of the development of a new socialist workers’ party.” (1)

Were we, as you propose, to collaborate with the SAV and Linksruck, we would have to join the Left Party, or at least regard support for this party as legitimate.

That is not our standpoint. If you follow our publications, our attitude towards the Left Party cannot have escaped you. For example, in our election manifesto for the 2009 European elections we say of the Left Party: “The PSG categorically rejects any collaboration with these parties. We regard them as our political opponents. The same applies to all organisations which defend the hegemony of the trade unions, which advocate collaboration with the Left Party, or which, like the so-called Communist Platform, Socialist Alternative (SAV) and Linksruck (Left Turn), work inside it.” (2)

What does the Left Party represent?

In order to correctly evaluate the Left Party, one must examine its programme, its political practice, its history and its social composition, rather than being dazzled by its populist clichés. Such an analysis shows that the Left Party is a state party which defends the bourgeois order. Its leadership consists of veteran functionaries from the former Socialist Unity Party (SED—the ruling party of the former East Germany), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the trade unions, who have decades of experience in suppressing the working class.

The programme of the Left Party defends capitalist private property and the bourgeois state. It has clearly moved to the right since the beginning of the world economic crisis. It has expressly supported the government’s bank rescue package, which has pumped billions of public funds into the banks in order to pay for their speculative losses. Prominent representatives of the party solidarized themselves with the war waged by Israel against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. And at their last European party congress, they expressed support for the European Union.

In the midst of the Bundestag (federal parliament) election campaign, when a massacre in Kunduz, Afghanistan organised by the German armed forces cost the lives of over 100 people and revealed the true character of the Afghanistan war, the Left Party dropped its demand for the immediate withdrawal of all troops. Since then it has stressed that a withdrawal of troops should not take place “the day after tomorrow” and called for an “exit strategy.” This demand corresponds to Social Democratic Foreign Minister Steinmeier’s Afghanistan plan, which calls for a substantial increase in military and in police trainers, and the plans of US commander McChrystal, who wants to deploy tens of thousands more US soldiers. “Exit strategy” is only another term for escalating the war to bring a decision all the faster.

This is the pattern that is always followed by the Left Party. It tries to deflect any popular mobilization against social attacks or war by employing demagogic clichés, the better, at the crucial moment, to subordinate popular opposition to the needs of German imperialism. It is obviously preparing to take on governmental responsibility at the federal level, should this be required by a worsening of the social crisis.

In several states and municipalities in the former East Germany, the Left Party, and its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), participates in the government and functions as the reliable guarantor of capitalist interests. In the capital, Berlin, where the Left Party/PDS has been in the city government for eight years in a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), it has helped to implement a drastic austerity programme at the expense of the public sector and the socially disadvantaged.

The SAV justifies its support for the Left Party with the statement that it is “despite all its contradictions and errors, at present the only starting point for the gathering together of those forces” which could form a

combative workers' party. It has "many thousands of members and millions of voters, who see in the party the chance to articulate at a political level the interests of wage earners and the socially disadvantaged." The struggle over Marxist and revolutionary ideas primarily takes place "in and around" the Left Party. Those who avoid working inside the Left Party are trapped in "radical left-wing niches," the SAV claims.

That is a grotesque misrepresentation of the Left Party. It is not a centrist organization, which, under the pressure of the masses, is moving towards socialism. It does not have any democratic internal life, and its leadership is largely immune from any pressure from below. It determines its policies over the heads of the members and is not beholden to any democratic control by its local federations.

The Left Party cannot even be compared with the social democratic parties of the post-war period, which, like the British Labour Party or the German SPD, also advocated a bourgeois programme, but still had mass influence among workers. The latter is lacking in the Left Party. It is not a mass party. The majority of its members are inactive or are pensioners and only a small section originates from the working class.

Its voters as well come predominantly from the middle class. A study by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) last year concluded that those on low incomes or from downwardly mobile social layers did not find above-average representation among its supporters. In particular, in the former East Germany, the Left Party relies predominantly on well situated and educated supporters. Here, the proportion of Left Party supporters is greatest among the "better-off elements in the middle class." In the West, where its influence is substantially weaker, most supporters originated from the lower-middle class.

The Left Party is the result of the combination of two bureaucratic apparatuses—or, more accurately, the skeletons of two bureaucratic apparatuses—which have long stood against the working class. When the PDS and the Election Alternative (WASG) joined together in 2005 for the Bundestag elections, (the official founding of the Left Party took place two years later), the PDS had approximately 60,000 members, of whom 90 percent had belonged to the SED before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and 70 percent were over 60 years old. The WASG brought along 11,500 members, predominantly experienced trade union bureaucrats and SPD functionaries, as well as a mixture of petty-bourgeois ex-radicals.

The old SED embodied the ruling bureaucratic caste of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), known more generally as East Germany. It was irreconcilably hostile to the working class, which it suppressed, as in the bloody defeat of the workers' rebellion of June 17, 1953.

The German bourgeoisie felt substantially closer to this bureaucracy than it did to the working class. That was clearly shown in 1989, when the SED played the key role in the restoration of capitalism in the East. In his autobiography, Hans Modrow, at that time the GDR head of government and to this day the chairman of the Left Party's Council of Elders, declared that he regarded the path to German unity as inevitable and that he followed it with determination.

The WASG was created by social democratic functionaries who were afraid that the rapid decline of the SPD under the Schröder government would leave a political vacuum in which revolutionary currents could gain a foothold. The WASG was an attempt to forestall this.

It is no coincidence that Oskar Lafontaine, who spent forty years inside the SPD, stands at the head of the Left Party. He ranks among the most experienced bourgeois politicians in Germany. For eleven years he was mayor of Saarbrücken, for 13 years the state premier of Saarland, for four years the SPD's federal leader, and for five months the federal minister of finance. He is far more acutely conscious of the dangers posed to the capitalist order by a social rebellion than other bourgeois politicians. His populist demagoguery is designed to deflect such a movement and block its path. As soon as the Left Party takes over government responsibility or

confronts important political events, it abandons its populist mask.

Contrary to the claims of the SAV, the Left Party is not the starting point for the building of a combative workers' party, but the result of a conscious initiative by representatives of the ruling class. Its whole *raison d'être* consists of suppressing any independent movement of the working class. Most of its members would unhesitatingly agree with the notorious statement uttered by SPD leader and president of the Weimar Republic, Friederich Ebert: "I hate the revolution like a sin."

In order to suffocate social resistance, the Left Party not only avails itself of propaganda, it is also prepared to employ the state's repressive apparatus, as the SPD-Left Party Berlin city government has proved again and again.

Our international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has over fifty years experience with political tendencies that have sought to liquidate the Trotskyist movement in the name of "entrism." The ICFI was created in 1953 in a struggle against the efforts of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel to dissolve the sections of the Fourth International into the Stalinist parties. Pablo and Mandel justified this by citing the alleged dual character of Stalinism. They maintained that defeating Stalinism would not take place through the building of the Fourth International, but "in the form of a violent internal-bureaucratic struggle between the elements calling for the status quo or even for a backward step, and for the ever more numerous elements driven by the powerful pressure of the masses."

The SAV and former Linksruck do not add anything new to the arguments of Pablo and Mandel. In a similar way, they are trying to fool people into believing that the contradictions within the Left Party will find expression in a new revolutionary current. There is, however, a difference: Pablo had developed his theories at a time when Stalinism stood at the high point of its power, the forms of property relations of the Soviet Union were being expanded into Eastern Europe, and in some countries (such as France and Italy) it had mass influence in the working class.

Pablo's entrism referred to the Stalinist, social democratic and nationalist mass organizations. The entrism of the SAV and Linksruck lacks any class content. It has become a formula for the dissolution of the Fourth International into virtually any organization. They have joined a party which is not even a shadow of the former Communist mass parties and has no purchase in the working class. Their arguments could also be used to justify entering the SPD or Obama's Democratic Party.

Election results and party programme

Now to your second question. You accuse us of "talking up" the PSG's result in the European elections and demand we take "a critical look at strategy." That betrays a completely opportunist understanding of elections. We participate in elections in order to develop and build our party. Therefore, clarity of programme is the central issue. This is all the more important under conditions where there is as of yet no significant revolutionary, socialist element in the masses.

Our small election result, compared to the 62 million registered voters, is an important indicator of the political development of the masses. It is, however, not the starting point of our programme and tactics. Our programme is not based on whatever might find a resonance at any given time. It relies on an analysis of the objective situation and on the historical experiences of the international workers' movement. Our criterion is not this or that immediate success, in terms of votes, but the question: Is our programme correct? Does it correspond to the tasks that flow from the changes in the objective situation? Does it prepare the working class for the coming developments? Does it promote the workers' initiative and

political independence? Does it articulate the historical interests of the working class?

In 1938, when Leon Trotsky was discussing the founding programme of the Fourth International, he stressed this point. He asked the question, should we “make our program fit the objective situation or the mentality of the workers?” and answered: “The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is a tool to overcome and defeat the backwardness.” (3)

The European elections this year took place in the midst of the deepest crisis of world capitalism in 70 years. That formed the starting point for our election programme. We were the only party to openly state that capitalism has failed and that the great social problems of the day can be solved only by a socialist transformation of society.

The election manifesto explained the political tasks that flow from the capitalist crisis and prepared the working class for the coming class battles. It stated: “Under the surface, an enormous social storm is brewing. We see our task as preparing and directing such a storm politically 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.”

Our programme won much support, which was expressed particularly in well-attended meetings and in new contacts and members. However, with some 10,000 votes, the election result was clearly lower than in 2004, when the PSG received nearly 26,000 votes.

There are several reasons for this. Election turnout among workers and the socially disadvantaged was substantially lower than in the previous election. Those voting were predominantly from better-off urban middle-class layers who support the European Union, as reflected in an above-average result for the Greens and other parties that rest on these layers. Also, the candidacy of several protest parties, which concentrated on only one question, played a role. For example, the newly created Pirate Party, which opposes Internet censorship, won substantial support among students and young people.

Politically more important was the fact that the growth of a revolutionary party is closely linked to the active intervention of the masses into political events. It wins influence if it is seen as a fighting party that is closely linked to the activity of the masses.

The relatively good result for the PSG in the 2004 European election was closely connected with the mass protests at that time against the Hartz labour and welfare “reforms.” These protests, which had developed independently of the established parties and trade unions, increased the self-confidence of many workers, who then supported the PSG in the election. In this year’s European elections, social opposition expressed itself above all passively, in the form of abstention. This also affected the PSG’s election result. Above all, it is the Left Party and the trade unions, which strangled all social protests, which bear responsibility for this.

Such fluctuations in election results on the eve of great class struggles are not unusual. The election result of a revolutionary party like the PSG, which is assembling a Marxist cadre and whose election results can presently be measured in four or five digits, cannot be judged by the same criteria as the bourgeois parliamentary election machines, whose influence is based on the size of their apparatus, their financial means and their media presence.

From the number of votes cast for a revolutionary party alone it is completely false to derive conclusions about the correctness or otherwise of its political line. Those who proceed in such a manner inevitably end up in the swamp of opportunism. The attempt to win more votes by abandoning political principles leads to complete degeneration. That also applies to larger parties, as the history of the SPD shows.

The SPD and the “Hottentot election”

The reaction of the SPD to the so-called “Hottentot election”—the 1907 Reichstag (national) election—contributed substantially to the party’s rightward development, ultimately resulting in the historical betrayal of 1914, when the party voted to support war credits.

The 1907 election was dominated by colonial policy issues. It had been called at short notice after the SPD and the Catholic Zentrum party defeated the introduction of a supplementary credit for the colonial war in German Southwest Africa (today’s Namibia). German troops were responsible for committing genocide against the Herero people, and then proceeded with the same brutality against the Nama, whom they disparagingly referred to as Hottentots.

The government, the fleet and colonial federations, as well as a bloc of bourgeois parties, conducted an hysterical election campaign against the SPD. “The party had never before confronted such an offensive of nationalist, chauvinist and militaristic ideology financed by monopoly capital; never faced such a pogrom atmosphere. Colonialist propaganda, racist ideology and the glorification of war flourishes,” is how the atmosphere at the time was described in a biography of the then-SPD chairman, August Bebel.

This campaign found a resonance in the petty-bourgeoisie. The SPD was completely isolated. Although it slightly increased its absolute number of votes, it lost over half of its parliamentary seats because the bourgeois parties joined together against it in the run-off vote. Up to then, the SPD had been able to increase its number of Reichstag seats from poll to poll.

The different currents within the SPD reacted in completely contradictory ways to this setback. The right wing regarded the anti-imperialist views of the party as the reason for the loss of seats and pleaded for the party to take a more conciliatory stance on colonial policy and concentrate on the details of reformist work. The left wing interpreted the election as a political turning point. “It shows us that coming political developments will be shaped by world politics. World politics mean militarism, colonial policy,” wrote Rosa Luxemburg.

Luxemburg saw a direct connection between the Russian revolution of 1905 and the agitation against the SPD. “The Russian revolution shook the unshakeable power of the bourgeoisie,” she declared. “It leads towards an enormous social battle of all the exploited against all exploiters, it reveals the unfolding power of the proletariat, like the world has never seen.” She noted that it had also imparted a fright to the German bourgeoisie—the fear that the German proletariat might likewise turn to the means of the mass strike.

Luxemburg drew from this the conclusion that the SPD had to increasingly utilise revolutionary weapons. She vehemently opposed the view of the party right wing that the election had weakened the SPD. She wrote: “We lost approximately half of our seats. Those who believe, however, that our political power is weakened thereby overrate the influence of parliamentarianism. We are a revolutionary mass party. Our political power lies, therefore, not in the number of our Reichstag seats, but in the number of our supporters among the people.” (5)

The chairman of the SPD, Bebel, tended to support the views of the left, but refused to act against the right wing. When Richard Calwer, a well-known representative of the opportunist wing, openly expressed support for the government’s colonial policy, Bebel defended him in the Reichstag. On the other hand, when Karl Liebknecht’s statement, “Militarism and Anti-Militarism with Special Regard to the International Young Socialist Movement,” was banned and proceedings for high treason were begun against him, Bebel disassociated himself from Liebknecht’s statement. The right-wing nationalist wing, which would determine SPD policy from 1914 on, was, in 1907, still in the minority, but it had been given a free hand to disseminate its chauvinist poison.

Where would you have stood in this dispute? Most likely you would have similarly asked: “Why can’t such a bad result be taken as the occasion for a critical look at strategy?” and pleaded for an adaptation to the right wing in the party.

I hope I have made it clear that we are determined not to go this way. We follow Rosa Luxemburg and interpret the rightward development of petty-bourgeois ex-radicals, who cling to the Left Party, as an indication of a sharpening of the social and political situation—one that permits no political half-measures and forces all political tendencies to show their true colours. If we were to follow the SAV and adapt to the Left Party, we would commit a betrayal of historical proportions. At a time when the perspective of the Fourth International has found its historical confirmation in the collapse of the Stalinist and reformist organizations and the crisis of world capitalism, this would be to abandon a revolutionary perspective and disarm the working class on the eve of great class battles.

We reject this completely.

On behalf of the executive committee of the PSG,

Peter Schwarz

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(1) SAV spokesman Sascha Stanicic in an interview with Linke Zeitung

(2) A Socialist Answer to the Capitalist Crisis: Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Germany)

(3) Leon Trotsky, quoted in The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International, Labor Publications, 1988, p. 74

(4) August Bebel. Eine Biografie, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1989, p 647

(5) Rosa Luxemburg, “Die Lehren der Letzten Reichstagwahl,” in Gesammelte Werke, Volume 2, Berlin 1986, p191



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