

Twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall

Statement of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter, October 18, 1989—Part 1

Overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy! Build workers' councils in East Germany!

5 November 2009

Twenty years ago, on November 4, 1989, witnessed the biggest demonstration in the history of East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR). Approximately 1 million people gathered in the centre of East Berlin to protest against the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy.

The demonstration in Berlin was the peak of a wave of protests that had begun in Leipzig two months previously and had grown week by week. The Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime had already resigned at this point. On October 18, the Politburo head and long-time state council chairman, Erich Honecker, was replaced by Egon Krenz. Shortly afterwards other despised SED functionaries, such as Erich Mielke, head of the GDR secret police, the Stasi, and Kurt Hager, the party's head of propaganda, also resigned from their posts.

On November 9, five days after the mass demonstration in Berlin, the SED opened up the Berlin Wall. This began the process of the dissolution of the GDR, which, following a joint treaty and currency union with the west of the country, eventually ended with the reunification of Germany.

At the November 4 demonstration, however, there was no mention made of such a course of events. Instead, the mass protest took the form of political and social opposition to the Stalinist regime, and was dominated by such slogans as: Free elections! Resignation of the government! Abolition of the SED's monopoly on power! Abolition of the privileges of the party and state functionaries! Dissolution of the Stasi!

The speakers at the Berlin demonstration were representatives of the petty-bourgeois opposition in East Germany and consisted of artists, priests and lawyers who sought to defuse the anger and concerns of those attending by appealing for a "dialogue" with the regime. Those organising the demonstration also allowed prominent members of the SED to speak, including Gregor Gysi, Günter Schabowski and the long-time assistant head of the Stasi, Markus Wolf.

The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (Socialist Workers League), the predecessor of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany), distributed an appeal at the demonstration in the form of a pamphlet. Prior to the demonstration, thousands of copies of this appeal had been smuggled across the east-west border, which was still closed at this point. As a Trotskyist party, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA) fought against the Stalinist regime from a left standpoint and had been banned from conducting any activity since the foundation of the East German state in 1949. The SED conducted an uncompromising campaign of repression against any underground oppositional movements, while at the same time establishing close ties with the West German federal republic and its leading political figures—Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt,

Helmut Kohl and Franz Josef Strauß—from the 1970s onwards.

The BSA was the only political tendency to put forward a program of opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy based on an international socialist perspective. The party's warning of the catastrophic social consequences of the introduction of capitalism, which would in turn inaugurate a new period of imperialist conflicts and wars, has been completely vindicated by the course of events.

The appeal issued by the BSA welcomed the opposition to the GDR regime. It stressed the connection between the crisis in the GDR and the crisis of world capitalism, whose "most important political prop" for the previous six decades had been precisely the Stalinist bureaucracies. The allies in the struggle against the SED were therefore neither "Gorbachev, the leader of the Stalinist headquarters in Moscow, nor Western capitalist politicians, nor the Social Democratic Party or union bureaucrats, but only the international working class."

On the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall we are republishing this appeal. In the coming days and weeks the WSWS will publish a series of articles dealing with the background and results of the reunification of Germany, further reports and commentaries relating to the 20th anniversary, as well as additional material from the archives of the BSA.

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This statement by the Central Committee of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter, the predecessor of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, was published on October 18, 1989, in the BSA's newspaper, Neue Arbeiterpresse. Below we post the first of three parts of the statement.

The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter warmly salutes the mass demonstrations and struggle of workers and youth in East Germany against the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy! We call on all workers, trade unionists and youth in East and West Germany to support this struggle! Defend all those participating in demonstrations and strikes against repression and persecution by the bureaucracy of the Socialist Unity Party (SED)! (SED is the official name of the East German Communist Party.)

Only a few weeks ago, in the lead article of *Neue Arbeiterpresse* on August 25, 1989, we predicted that the continuing mass exodus from East Germany was merely the harbinger of a workers' uprising against the SED regime. This assessment has already proven to be correct. The mass exodus out of East Germany has turned into a mass movement within East Germany, which has already toppled the former leader of the party and head of state, Erich Honecker.

Despite brutal police attacks, entirely in the bloody tradition of

Stalinism, the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of youth and workers in East Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Magdeburg and other cities have already shaken the arrogant, seemingly all-powerful bureaucracy to its roots. In a panic reaction, hundreds of officials were sent for on-the-spot discussions into all large factories in order to appease the workforce and give them hope through a “dialogue” on “all problems.” The bureaucracy rightly fears that the demonstrations on the streets today will be followed by mass strikes in the factories tomorrow.

Although the political demands of this movement up to this point stem largely from petty-bourgeois layers who are the spokesmen, its real source and powerful driving force is the profound and irreconcilable hatred of the working class against the ruling layer of parasites and bureaucrats.

This bureaucracy is led by veteran henchmen of Stalinism like Erich Honecker, the architect of the Berlin Wall and the death traps at the East German border, and his pupil and successor, Egon Krenz. The shift from Honecker to Krenz in the leadership of the party and the government is part of the preparations of the bureaucracy for the coming violent confrontations with the working class. As a member of the SED Central Committee, Krenz had previously been responsible for the entire security apparatus of the bureaucracy. He emphatically supported the bloody massacre of thousands of workers and students by the Beijing Stalinists and hailed it as a “victory over counterrevolution.” He routinely falsified the results of elections, as in the latest local elections, and also organized all the police attacks on demonstrators. With Krenz, the top prison warden and police chief of East Germany has been assigned the task of forming a new government and “solving all problems.” He, like Honecker, will be counseled by the old Kurt Hager, who since his days as chief propagandist of the Stalinist secret police during the Spanish Civil War has invented new, cynical justifications for every crime of Stalinism. Other SED bureaucrats below him may be younger and may appear more “moderate” or “in favour of reforms.” However, they all owe their positions and privileges to this repressive apparatus of Stalinism.

An uprising against Stalinism and capitalism

With their mass demonstrations, the working class and youth in East Germany have joined the Chinese and Soviet working class in their fight against the Stalinist bureaucracy. They have thus enormously deepened the international crisis of Stalinism. In doing so, they strengthen the working class in West Germany, Western Europe, Asia and America in its fight against capitalism, because for the last six decades Stalinism has functioned as the main counterrevolutionary prop of world imperialism within the international workers’ movement. It is Stalinism that bears responsibility for the delay in the world revolution, which began in 1917 under the leadership of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, and for the defeats of the working class, such as Germany in 1933 or Spain in 1936. Stalinism enabled the capitalists to stay in power through horrid dictatorships and fascism and to continue their system of exploitation even after the catastrophe of World War II.

This counterrevolutionary collaboration between imperialism and Stalinism has been organized in countless treaties and secret agreements: the Hitler-Stalin pact, Moscow’s agreement to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the agreements of Yalta and Potsdam, the treaties on the division of Vietnam and the Indian subcontinent, the establishment of the racist state of Israel, right up to Mikhail Gorbachev’s latest deals with the US government, called “ending regional tensions,” which are directed against the national liberation struggles and the oppressed peoples, for example, the Nicaraguans, Angolans, Palestinians and the Tamils.

The historical crisis of capitalism

The collapse of Stalinism, therefore, coincides with the deepest crisis of imperialism. Even the closest collaboration between the imperialists and Stalinists could not prevent the objective laws of the capitalist mode of production, discovered by Karl Marx, from again bringing to the surface the insoluble historical crisis of capitalism, putting revolutionary struggles of the working class on the agenda. This is the situation of the working class today under capitalism, a social system which in our century has proven its historical bankruptcy by two world wars, fascism and countless murderous dictatorships: more than 20 million officially unemployed in the European Community (EC) countries, in reality, more than 30 million; the ongoing destruction of all social reforms and rights which had been won through struggles after World War II, for example, the health service and old age pensions in the Federal Republic of Germany; the impoverishment of the working class in the United States, whose living standards have dropped by 30 percent during the past 10 years; galloping inflation not only in Latin America, but also in Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and such developed industrial countries as Britain.

The latest upheavals on the foreign exchange markets and the sharp drop in stock values on the international stock markets, resembling the international stock market crash of 1987, have demonstrated the fragility of the entire international banking and finance system, which may collapse any day and lead to unprecedented mass unemployment, war and civil war virtually over night. The preparations for the European single market, an instrument for trade war against its American and Japanese rivals on the world market, signify a class war by the capitalists in every country. They are attempting to smash the rights, jobs and wages of the working class as was done in the 1930s. Above all, this means the preparation of new imperialist wars.

Under these conditions, the reformist impostors of social democracy and Stalinism, who have tried to make the working class believe that capitalism would be stable for centuries to come and could be reformed, and that revolutionary perspectives were futile—these impostors inevitably begin to lose influence. While all reformist bureaucrats openly support the respective capitalist nation-states and try to impose attacks on the working class in the name of the “national (profit) interest” by propagating nationalism, organizing trade war and arming the state apparatus for civil war, the working class throughout the world is heading in the opposite direction. More than ever galvanized internationally due to the globalization of production and trade, it seeks to break the chains of nationalism and the bourgeois nation-states, with which the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies split the working class and strive to tie it to the interests of capital.

The beginning of a new period of revolutionary struggles

The uprising of the working class in Eastern Europe, China and the Soviet Union against Stalinism must be grasped in this context: it is part of an unfolding international rebellion of the working class against the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies, which during the past decades politically controlled the workers movement and subordinated it to imperialism. Thus, all the political mechanisms through which imperialism upheld its rule in the postwar period are collapsing. A new period of revolutionary class struggles has begun! This is the true

historical significance of the mobilization of the working class in East Germany against the regime in East Berlin. This is why the capitalist governments and their political strategists are not in the least delighted with the events in East Germany. Again and again, representatives of the Kohl government as well as the SPD have stressed that they have “no interest in destabilizing East Germany,” because this would “be harmful to the West, too.”

The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter therefore warns the working class by directing its attention to the experiences of the working class in 1953 in East Germany and 1956 in Hungary: Their allies are neither Gorbachev, the leader of the Stalinist headquarters in Moscow, nor Western capitalist politicians, nor the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) or union bureaucrats, but only the international working class.

Reform or revolution?

With the latest mass demonstrations, the working class in East Germany has again taken up the struggle it began with the workers’ uprising in 1953. At the same time, it is carrying forward the revolutionary struggles against the Stalinist bureaucracy in Poland and Hungary, 1956; in Czechoslovakia, 1968; and again in Poland, 1980-81. Now the working class is confronted with the question: Which program can ensure victory in this struggle?

“The right to demonstrate and to organize!” “Freedom of the press! Freedom of speech and travel!” “Abolition of all privileges for the functionaries in the state, party and union bureaucracy!”

These are the immediate demands at demonstrations and which are discussed in the factories. The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter energetically supports these demands! But they cannot be realized through a “dialogue” with the bureaucracy or through “reform,” as the founders of the New Forum and the SPD are claiming!

The bureaucracy is a cancerous growth, a corrupt parasitic layer in the workers state. The call of the New Forum for a dialogue or an “equal, democratic coexistence” between the ruling bureaucracy and the rest of society therefore amounts to the call for equal rights and democracy both for the parasite and its host.

All the positions and privileges, indeed the entire existence of the bureaucracy is based precisely on the suppression of all democratic rights of the working class, suppression of the freedom to assemble and organize, the freedom of speech and travel. For this oppression, they rely on their fanatic police machine and their monopoly of power in the state apparatus and in public life.

Therefore the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter states categorically: political freedom and democratic rights can be won only through a political revolution, in which the working class overthrows the ruling bureaucracy, drives it out of all its posts and establishes independent organs of proletarian power and democracy, workers’ councils, elected by the workers in the factories and neighbourhoods, accountable to them and based solely on their strength and mobilization.

The working class must reject with contempt the appeals of the bishops and priests who warn of further demonstrations because “the government will not move under the pressure of the streets.” Just like the Catholic Church in Poland, the Protestant church in Prussia comes out openly to prop up the ruling bureaucracy when it is threatened by an open revolutionary uprising. They open up their churches for the opposition not in order to facilitate the overthrow of the rulers, but in order to keep the opposition under control and to subordinate it to the alliance of “throne and altar.” And indeed, the appeals of Bishop Krusche went unheeded and were answered with a demonstration of first 70,000, and then 120,000

workers and youth in Leipzig.

The calls of the presidium of the writers association in East Germany for “revolutionary reforms” deserve no less contempt. These bootlicking “poets laureate” of the bureaucracy like Hermann Kant or Stephan Hermlin supplement the coercion of the prisons, the secret police and the guns by outrage upon the human mind. Obedient to the daily needs of the rulers, they falsify the greatest ideas of humanity and misuse them to justify Stalinism and its crimes. Yesterday, on orders of the SED’s Walter Ulbricht or Erich Honecker, they enthusiastically organized witch-hunts against oppositionist writers, aiming to destroy both their art and their livelihoods. Their present call for “revolutionary reforms,” that is, for the subordination to a “reformed” bureaucracy, is cynically garnished with the quote that under socialism, “the free development of every single one is the precondition for the free development of all.” This quote comes from the *Communist Manifesto*, that program in which Marx and Engels summoned the working class for its liberation from all oppression. While the principal task of the artist in society is to keep awake and encourage among the oppressed and exploited the striving for a better world, the feeling of human dignity and pride, which will defy any police terror, these intellectual prostitutes of the bureaucracy work to destroy this striving and these feelings and to spread nothing but cynicism towards the principles of revolutionary Marxism.

Democracy: bourgeois or proletarian?

The working class must also reject the program of the New Forum and must break with all illusions in the policies of Gorbachev, the leader of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. The New Forum calls on people to take to the streets and to demonstrate, but it rejects mobilizing the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy and demands a “dialogue” and “reforms” instead.

The demand for “democracy” and “pluralism,” separated from or counterposed to constructing organs of workers’ power, does not lead to the emancipation of the working class. There is no form of rule independent of the two main classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Lenin defended this discovery of Marxism against Karl Kautsky, who in the name of “democracy” supported the German imperialists in their war against Russian imperialism, rejected the taking of power by the working class in October 1917 and welcomed the suppression of the revolution in Germany in 1918-1919.

“‘Pure democracy’ is the mendacious phrase of a liberal who wants to fool the workers. History knows of bourgeois democracy, which takes the place of feudalism, and of proletarian democracy, which takes the place of bourgeois democracy.... Bourgeois democracy, although a great historical advance in comparison with medievalism, always remains, and under capitalism is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited and the poor” (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965], pp. 242-43).

The abstract demand for “democracy,” or rather the sometimes open glorification of bourgeois democracy by the representatives of petty-bourgeois layers within the protest movement against the Honecker regime, is in reality nothing but a cover for the introduction of *bourgeois democracy*, i.e., the dictatorship of capital over the working class. It does not express the interests of the working class, but the strivings of petty-bourgeois layers, who aim at a reconciliation with the bureaucracy and an improvement of their own position on the backs of the working class.

The working class in East Germany must take a dire warning from the propaganda for “democracy” and “openness” under Gorbachev in the

Soviet Union, General Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland and Imre Pozsgay in Hungary: it is a cover for the destruction of the last remaining conquests of the October Revolution, the nationalized industry and planned economy, a cover for the introduction of private ownership of the means of production and exploitation of the working class for profit under perestroika.

In Poland, petty-bourgeois radical leaders with a program similar to that of the New Forum have played a decisive role in the Solidarity movement. Sometimes they posed as a “left” alternative to Lech Walesa, but they rejected the mobilization of the working class for the overthrow of the bureaucracy. In doing so, they disarmed the working class politically and paved the way for martial law. Today they form part of the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki and seek to impose on workers what the Stalinist bureaucracy on its own felt unable to realize: a massive austerity program, dictated by the International Monetary Fund, for the impoverishment of the masses. Prices are increased while all wage increases are stopped; there are to be shutdowns and the privatization of state industry.

A similar program for the re-creation of a “social market economy” and “pluralistic democracy,” that is, capitalist restoration as followed by the Solidarity leadership and the Mazowiecki government in Poland, is favoured by the newly-founded Social Democratic Party in East Germany, which, just like the New Forum, pins its hopes on Gorbachev and his policies of perestroika for the “democratization of state and society.”

The true nature of this kind of “democracy,” directed against workers, has become clear in the recent miners strike in the Soviet Union and the reaction of the Moscow bureaucracy under Gorbachev to this strike. This strike was directed not only against the miserable living and working conditions, but above all against the content and consequences of perestroika, against the introduction of a capitalist private economy via cooperatives. It demanded, instead, workers’ control of production and distribution. Gorbachev’s reaction to this was the introduction of an antistrike law. This law will make strikes like the miners strike illegal. If any strikes are allowed, it will be only in a few industries and under the strict control of the bureaucracy, and not directed against it.

Just as in Poland, the press, police and the entire state apparatus remain in the hands of the bureaucracy, which has merely replenished its ranks with parvenus and nouveaux riches from the middle class, in order to facilitate its development into a new ruling capitalist class against the working class.

The bloody massacre in Beijing and the use of troops in the Ukraine and Georgia against demonstrators prove that these so-called reforms, this bourgeois democracy, this reintroduction of capitalism is possible only through the most brutal violence, through the terror of the army and police against the working class. They strikingly illustrate the fraudulent nature of all talk about “dialogue” and “reform” of the Stalinist bureaucracy, of all of its wings, no matter whether they are led by Honecker, Krenz or Modrow, the district secretary of Dresden, in East Germany, or by Gorbachev or Ligachev in the USSR. Both the Moscow government and the regime in East Berlin have applauded the military suppression of the demonstrations in Beijing.

There are no principled differences between Gorbachev and Modrow on the one side and Ligachev and Honecker on the other. There are only tactical differences about the speed and methods needed to impose their policies against the working class. The reason why the Honecker clique had hesitated to follow the course of Gorbachev and Jaruzelski was not because they upheld some “principles of socialism.” Rather, they are acutely conscious that this course will, just like in the USSR, in China and Poland lead to mass strikes and uprisings of the working class. These developments will by far exceed the uprising of June 17, 1953, and the bureaucracy feels unable to confront them.

Real workers’ democracy—working class control, by means of democratically elected workers’ councils, over production, foreign trade,

distribution of goods, all social matters like health care and education, the press, and workers’ militias and all state institutions—such a proletarian democracy, therefore, can never be achieved through support for one or the other wing of the bureaucracy, but only through the revolutionary mobilization for the overthrow of the bureaucracy as a whole!

Reform, bourgeois democracy, i.e., the dictatorship of capital on one side; or revolution, workers’ democracy and socialism on the other—there is no other road, no other alternative for the working class in East and West Germany. This follows inevitably from the class nature of the ruling regime in East Germany.

The government that the working class confronts in East Germany, throughout Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union is not a “socialist government,” a “workers government,” making mistakes or afflicted with weaknesses. If this were the case, pressure from below could make it more democratic or favourable to workers. However, as the entire history of this regime demonstrates, it is counterrevolutionary through and through and defends its privileges and despotism with the same police-state methods, arrogance and absolutism as the old Prussian state. The very existence and power of this bureaucracy cannot be reconciled with the interests and strivings of the working class. Indeed, the bureaucracy’s existence is the main cause of the mass exodus from East Germany and the growing shortage of supplies. So no matter how much the SED government now proclaims its preparedness to “uncover the causes” and “conduct a dialogue,” it will of course never name, let alone abolish, this principal cause. Hypocritically, it still claims to speak in the name of “socialism,” but in reality its role is to block the working class from socialist revolution in the service of the Kremlin bureaucracy and imperialism.

To be continued



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