

ISSE meetings in Germany: “Education is a class issue”

Our correspondents
29 June 2010

Last week, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) completed a series of meetings across Germany under the title “Massive Social Cutbacks and the Attacks on Education.” The meetings took place against the background of the most extensive social cuts to be carried out in Germany since the Second World War.

Two days before the opening meeting in Mannheim on June 9, the German government—a coalition of conservative parties and the free-market Free Democratic Party—agreed on an austerity programme aimed at making savings amounting to €80 billion by the year 2014. The class character of the austerity package is immediately evident. After having donated billions to the banks, the government’s programme is aimed at milking ordinary workers and the poor. The wealthy and the super-rich remain untouched.

At the centre of the discussions at the ISSE meetings was the thesis that the defence of the right to education is a class question. Representatives of the ISSE declared that under conditions of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, it is impossible to resolve the problems emerging in the sphere of education and at universities by appeals and protests aimed at the ruling elite. A free, fair and democratic education system cannot be established within capitalism, but requires instead a socialist reorganisation of society.

The ISSE speakers stressed that, in turn, this required the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of an international socialist programme. Workers must intervene as an independent force and break with the perspective of social democracy and the trade unions. It is social democratic parties in Greece, Spain and Portugal that are carrying out fierce attacks against workers while trade unions are doing everything in their power to isolate and sabotage protests against the cuts.

At meetings in Berlin, Leipzig and Bielefeld, ISSE member Johannes Stern explained in his report the differences between the ISSE and other so-called leftist student groups on these two crucial issues: “With phrases such as ‘Unity of the Left,’ groups like the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society, the student group attached to the Left Party] seek to reawaken hopes in the Social Democratic Party, the Greens, the trade unions and the Left Party. We reject this position in favour of the stance taken by a leader of the German workers’ movement, Karl Liebknecht, who declared, ‘First clarity, then unity’ ”.

The unity of the left proclaimed by the SDS, Stern declared, is in

fact a unity of right-wing forces. The political balance sheet of these parties is disastrous. It was the SPD and Greens who introduced the Agenda 2010 programme and the so-called Hartz laws involving the most deep-going cuts to the social welfare fabric in Germany since the end of the war. At the same time, the SPD cut the top rate of tax and abolished finance laws, thus enabling the banks to indulge in a orgy of speculation. In the sphere of education, the same government supported the introduction of the Bologna Process, which had led to profound cuts at universities and the increasing subordination of education to business interests.

The Left Party was by no means better when it came to the same issues, merely more deceitful, Stern continued. The Left Party occasionally criticises the SPD and the Greens, but in those regions where it shares government power it implements social cuts with especial brutality. In the state of Brandenburg, the SPD and Left Party have signed a coalition deal that involves the wiping out of 10,000 public service jobs. In Berlin, where the Left Party has ruled in the Senate in a coalition with the SPD since 2003, it has carried out an unparalleled programme of social cuts. In the sphere of education alone, the Senate slashed funding to the city’s universities by €75 million, cut hundreds of professorial posts and thousands of places for students, and closed entire institutes and faculties.

Uli Rippert, the chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), was invited to speak at the ISSE meetings in Berlin and Leipzig. He noted that attempts by layers of the ruling elite to increasingly integrate the SPD into government or even permit a SPD-Green Party-Left Party alliance should not be regarded as a turn to the left. Such a development would in fact involve a shift to the right. Rippert said, “With the aid of the trade unions, these parties would impose the cuts with even greater severity. Sections of the German bourgeoisie have come to the conclusion that the current government is too weak to impose austerity measures. Instead, they place their hopes on the social democrats who repeatedly played the leading role in securing the interests of the ruling class at times of crisis for German capitalism.”

At the end of the First World War, it was the SPD led by Ebert, Noske and Scheidemann that crushed the revolutionary movement by German workers and murdered Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg with the help of right-wing mercenaries. At the beginning of the 1930s, the SPD subordinated itself fully to

bourgeois rule, which was increasingly tending towards dictatorship. The party supported emergency laws, assisted in dividing the working class and so eased the path to power of Hitler and the National Socialists.

In 1969, it was SPD leader Willy Brandt who headed off the radicalisation of workers and students by introducing a number of concessions combined with a law in 1972 (Radikalenerlass) that openly victimised leftists and opponents of capitalism.

Now, once again, the SPD with the support of the Left Party was preparing to resolve the crisis of the German bourgeoisie and ensure that the working class bears the brunt of the cuts. "In order to implement such cuts against the population, brutal measures are necessary," Rippert said. "The SPD and the Left Party, which has its roots in the Stalinist ruling party of former East Germany, have already proved in the past that they are quite prepared to use violent measures in order to suppress an independent movement of the working class. Students must study the history of these parties and draw the necessary conclusions."

Rippert stressed that in light of the current historic crisis of capitalism, the most important task was the building of a new workers' party. In this respect, the PSG opposes the efforts of such organisations as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France to bring together all those forces that describe themselves as "left". The PSG was building a party based on principles and the lessons drawn from the history of the workers' movement, thereby enabling the working class to mobilise independently of the old bureaucratic apparatuses.

"We are at a point where major class struggles are pending," Rippert added. "What has taken place recently in Greece and China is just the beginning. Students must look upon themselves as a part of the working class, which is now attempting to find ways to oppose the cuts and austerity measures. The only way to prevent such measures and cuts in education and all other spheres of society is through the complex and difficult task of building a new international, socialist party."

All of the ISSE meetings were followed by lively discussion with a wide range of questions asked regarding the political perspectives of the ISSE.

At the ISSE meeting held in Leipzig, one participant with a diploma in philosophy declared that so-called precarious workers (the "precariat") were the new revolutionary avant-garde, while workers with a job represented a force for the stabilisation of the capitalist system. This argument was vigorously refuted by a number of other participants. It was pointed out that this line of argument played into the hands of government leaders who were seeking to play off one group in society against another.

One student from Leipzig declared that it was necessary to oppose any attempts to drive a wedge between workers and those without work. Equally, it was necessary for students to align themselves with workers. He was a student but regarded himself as a part of the working class: "I have had to work during most of my time in education because my study grant was insufficient. Many of my fellow students are in the same boat. They are also objectively part of the working class. Explaining this and drawing the necessary political conclusions is an important task of the ISSE."

At the meeting at the Technical University in Berlin, one participant from Greece asked the ISSE speakers to comment on the danger of extreme-right forces emerging in Germany following advances for fascist and extreme-right parties recently in Hungary and the Netherlands.

Representatives of the ISSE declared that it was the right-wing policies of organisations such as the Left Party or the Socialist Party in the Netherlands that created the basis for extreme-right parties to flourish. The electoral victories for extreme-right parties in Hungary and the Netherlands did not reflect a right-wing mood within the population. The problem was that the prevailing left-wing and anti-capitalist sentiments amongst broad layers of the population lacked any genuine political outlet. The only way to prevent further advances for extreme-right organisations was through the building of new workers' party.

Questions arose at a number of the meetings in response to declarations by speakers that a new workers' party was necessary. In Leipzig, one participant noted that workers' parties had repeatedly betrayed in the past—frequently developing in a totalitarian direction. He posed the alternative of a public platform as a means of achieving social change.

In response, Uli Rippert declared that an informal conglomerate of political tendencies in the form of a public platform would never be able to overcome German imperialism. He referred to the experience of the Greens who proclaimed their allegiance to rank-and-file democracy. This proved no obstacle to the leadership of the party in its overtures to revive German militarism. Rippert stressed that a resolute type of organisation was absolutely necessary to fight for socialist consciousness in the working class. At the same time, such a party must be democratic. Following an open and free discussion, any majority decision taken would then be binding for all members.

In order to evaluate the negative experiences with workers' parties that have betrayed the working class, it was necessary to seriously study the history of these organisations, Rippert declared. The history of the working class was not just a "catalogue of the repeated betrayals of workers' parties", but also the theoretical and practical struggle against these betrayals. In this respect, he noted that the PSG had drawn up a document of historical principles and stated that the PSG and ISSE would be holding a series of meetings to discuss this document in the coming weeks and months.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact