

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part ten

9 October 2010

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held its Founding Congress May 22-24, 2010 in Berlin. The Congress adopted the document “The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit” on May 23.

We are publishing the document in serialized form. Below is the tenth of eleven parts.

[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#) | [Part 6](#) | [Part 7](#) | [Part 8](#) | [Part 9](#) | [Part 10](#) | [Part 11](#)

XXV. The End of the GDR and the Soviet Union

199. In the same year that the WRP broke apart, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although there appeared, on the surface, to be no connection between the two events, they were closely linked. The globalisation of production had undermined the programme of “socialism in a single country” and unleashed a profound social crisis in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev introduced reforms which, within the space of a few years, led to the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In so doing, he was reacting to a long period of economic stagnation and growing social tensions. In particular, the Solidarity movement in Poland had shocked the ruling bureaucrats in Moscow, giving rise to fears that similar movements could develop in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev sought to forestall an offensive by the working class through an extension of civic liberties (glasnost) and through economic reforms (perestroika), while setting the course for capitalist restoration. He counted on the disorientation of the working class after decades of Stalinist rule, and on the support of petty-bourgeois dissidents.

200. The restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union confirmed Trotsky’s warning that the greatest danger to the achievements of the October revolution came from the Stalinist bureaucracy. In 1938, he had written: “Either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.” 109 The Stalinist bureaucracy finally achieved what neither white troops nor German tanks and American rockets had been able to: 74 years after the October revolution it liquidated the property relations that had resulted from one of the greatest popular uprisings in world history. The consequences of capitalist restoration were catastrophic for the popular masses. While a small layer of old bureaucrats and new

capitalists usurped state owned property and made fabulous fortunes, factories and entire spheres of industry were closed down, whole stretches of countryside left to ruin and a once extensive education, health, pension and social system, dismantled.

201. The conflict with the WRP had prepared the International Committee for this development. In March 1987, when western politicians, bourgeois journalists, Pabloite revisionists and the renegades of the WRP were singing the praises of Gorbachev, the IC published an extensive statement that stated unequivocally: “The proposals made by Gorbachev correspond completely ... to the character of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a counter-revolutionary agency of world imperialism. The core of these ‘reforms’ is a further undermining of the gains of the October Revolution, ... the nationalised property relations, the state monopoly of foreign trade and the very existence of the workers’ state. Confronted with the growing opposition of workers to the ossified bureaucratic caste, Gorbachev has undertaken to deal with some of its worst excesses from the standpoint of defending the bureaucracy as a whole, against the Soviet proletariat. Contrary to all those Stalinists, petty bourgeois radical pacifists, reformists and revisionists of all persuasions, who today sing the praises of the democratic Gorbachev just as their predecessors acclaimed Stalin the International Committee of the Fourth International remains an irreconcilable opponent of the bureaucracy.” 110

202. In 1989, the growing social tensions unleashed a wave of mass protests across Eastern Europe, toppling the Stalinist regimes like dominoes. The year began with the legalization of Solidarity in Warsaw and ended with the shooting of Ceausescu in Bucharest. Between these dates, the Berlin Wall fell on November 9. Broad social strata participated in the protests, including many workers. They expressed the widespread opposition toward the ruling bureaucracy. All of the masses’ accumulated anger and dissatisfaction burst to the surface. The International Committee intervened decisively in these developments. It greeted the mass demonstrations, but stressed, at the same time, that a solution to the crisis in the interests of the working class could only be achieved on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

203. On November 13 1989, four days after the fall of the Berlin wall, David North delivered a speech at the Historical Archival Institute in Moscow, addressing the contradiction between Gorbachev’s perspective and that of the working class: “What we see today in the Soviet Union is the complete collapse of the bankrupt program of socialism in one country. The claim that socialism could be built within the state boundaries of the USSR has been totally discredited. But the question is, how is the Soviet Union to obtain access to the world market, to the international division of labour and advanced technology? We believe there is only one of two ways: either through the integration of the Soviet Union into the structure of world imperialism...or through the unified international revolutionary struggle of the working class... It is the opinion

of the International Committee that the policies being pursued by the present Soviet government are aimed at the integration of the Soviet Union into the structure of world imperialism... You must understand that the Soviet bureaucracy fears the working class much more than it fears imperialism. It is for this reason that the aim of the Soviet bureaucracy is to develop ever closer economic and political ties with the imperialists against the working class." 111

204. When the GDR regime began to falter, the BSA intervened energetically. Due to vicious persecution, Trotskyists had been unable to intervene in the GDR prior to 1989. The BSA was now able to distribute large numbers of leaflets and newspapers, and in March 1990 took part in the last GDR parliamentary elections (Volkskammerwahl). It was the only political tendency that unconditionally defended all the gains of the working class while making no concessions to Stalinism. In its program published for the Volkskammerwahl, the party declared: "The working class stands at the crossroads: capitalism or socialism. Either the imperialists will reintroduce capitalism in co-operation with the regimes of Gorbachev, Mazowiecki, Modrow, Nemeth, Calfa or Iliescu in Eastern Europe, which in Poland has already led to a drastic worsening of workers' living conditions. Or the working class will carry through a political revolution to its conclusion, bringing down the Stalinist bureaucracy, taking power in its own hands and developing a real socialist society." 112

205. Irrespective of tactical differences with Gorbachev, the East German Stalinist leadership had already decided on capitalist restoration long before the first demonstrations took place in 1989. Günter Mittag, responsible for the GDR economy in the Politburo for nearly three decades, later confessed to *Der Spiegel*: "Without reunification, the GDR would have encountered an economic disaster with incalculable social consequences because it was simply not viable in the long term." He had already come to the conclusion, at the end of 1987, that "all hope is lost". 113 And Hans Modrow, who, as the last Stalinist Prime Minister of the GDR, prepared the reunification, wrote in his memoirs: "In my view, the road to unification had become inevitably necessary and had to be followed with determination." 114

206. For its part, the working class was completely unprepared for the political events of 1989. The Stalinist falsifications of history, the murder of an entire generation of communist revolutionaries during the Great Terror of the 1930s, the suppression of any independent movement of the working class by the SED and the undermining of Trotskyism by the Pabloites, had cut workers off from the historical continuity of Marxism and the program of the Fourth International. The so-called dissidents, who emerged in the course of the 1970s, came predominantly from intellectual or artistic circles and rejected a socialist orientation. They limited their demands to those of civil rights, and, in many cases, underwent a sharp turn to the right.

207. The lack of political orientation of those demonstrating in large numbers in the autumn of 1989 was clearly revealed in the individualist form initially taken by the movement: a mass escape to the West. At the head of the demonstrations were representatives of the petty bourgeois opposition, whose programmes did not go beyond vague demands for more democracy and for "democratic dialogue". They were characterised, above all, by a fear of social upheaval. "The goal of our proposals is to assure peace in our country", declared the "Theses for a Democratic Transformation of the GDR" of the organisation "Demokratie Jetzt". Like the German democrats of 1848, the GDR democrats of 1989 were "more frightened of the least popular movement than of all the reactionary plots of all the German Governments put together", as Friedrich Engels had written. 115

208. Faced with protests on the streets, the petty bourgeois opposition and the Stalinist rulers quickly found themselves united. The SED reacted to the mass demonstrations by sacrificing its Secretary-General of many years, Erich Honecker, and moving towards German unity under Hans Modrow, a longstanding Central Committee member. While in Modrow's own words "the daily new exposures of abuses of office and corruption by former prominent SED and state functionaries drove indignation in the country to boiling point", he regarded the task of his administration as preserving "the governability of the country and preventing chaos" and preparing German reunification. 116 To this end, he set up Round Tables with the petty-bourgeois oppositionists and took them into his government.

209. The BSA expressly warned of the consequences of this course of events: "The working class must reject with contempt all political tendencies that want to replace the Stalinist dictatorship with the dictatorship of the Deutsche Bank, i.e. with the dictatorship of imperialism. The enraged petty bourgeois at the Round Table go into rhapsodies about the advantages of capitalism at a time when the living conditions of the working class in all capitalist countries have drastically worsened over the last ten years; ... These petty bourgeois attack Stalinism because for them it was an obstacle to leading a similarly privileged life at the expense of the working class as the petty bourgeoisie in the West. Their struggle against Stalinism is a struggle against the working class. Their goal is to smash all the achievements of the working class." 117

210. The "enraged petty bourgeois at the Round Table" also included the supporters of Ernest Mandel. The Vereinigte Linke (United Left), in which the Pabloites played an important role, declared its readiness to take over government responsibility under Modrow. Mandel personally travelled to East Berlin in order to defend Gorbachev and the SED from Trotskyist criticism. In the Stalinist youth paper *Junge Welt* he denounced the intervention of the BSA in the GDR as "tactless". It was "evidence of a lack of political understanding when forces interfere from outside into the enormous mass movement in the GDR." Asked about the BSA's criticism of Gorbachev, Mandel answered: "Not to see the fact that one must defend the core of the achievements of 'Glasnost' against all its enemies as an enormous step forward for the Soviet working class, the Soviet people, the international working class and democratic forces throughout the world, seems to me to be a dangerous political blindness." 118

211. While the BSA courageously opposed the Stalinists and the petty bourgeois democrats, warning of the dangers inherent in the restoration of capitalism, it was itself in danger of idealising the mass movement, thus underestimating the crisis of leadership in the working class and its own political tasks. Centrist positions, systematically encouraged by the WRP in the 1970's, resurfaced. The International Committee rigorously discussed these issues. At the beginning of 1990, David North stated that it would be "one-sided and wrong for us to concentrate only on the 'objective' side of events as if the collapse of the East European regimes and the post war order could somehow take place completely separately and independently from the class struggle and the conscious clash of political forces. The subjective conscious factor is by no means insignificant. The fact that Stalinism has undermined the development of the political consciousness of the working class is certainly not the least of its crimes, and its consequences are themselves an important objective factor in the general political situation." 119

212. In further political discussions it was stressed that the "profound crisis of capitalism does not automatically translate itself into Marxist consciousness. Rather, while globalisation and world-wide integration of capitalist production enormously intensifies the contradictions of imperialism, it also breaks to pieces the old, nationally rooted

organisations of the working class. The ideological crisis of the international workers' movement is a reflection of that process." The collapse of the Stalinist regimes did not amount to a political revolution: "The political revolution is not just an objective event it is a program. ...Any tendency to objectivise and glorify the spontaneous drift of events is extremely dangerous. It is one thing for workers to reject Stalinism. It is another thing for them to adopt a revolutionary program." 120

213. At its 12th plenum in March 1992, the International Committee drew the following conclusion from the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union: "The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historic setting for a truly revolutionary situation. Only when we grasp this distinction between the general objective basis of the revolutionary movement and the complex political, social and cultural process through which it becomes a dominant historical force is it possible to understand the significance of our historical struggle against Stalinism and to see the tasks that are posed to us today." 121

214. The International Committee, however, also opposed the position that the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and China had resolved the crisis of imperialism and overcome its contradictions. The opposite was the case: "From a world historical standpoint the collapse of the East European regimes and the post war order as a whole means that all of the fundamental contradictions of imperialism re-emerge at a much higher level. Rather than beginning a new triumphant period of capitalist growth, imperialism in fact stands on the brink of a new bloody epoch of wars and revolutions. In other words, the contradictions which have come into play cannot be resolved in a peaceful manner. This is the issue which confronts the working class. It must resolve the crisis in a progressive way. Otherwise it will be resolved by capitalism in a very reactionary way." 122

215. Only from this international standpoint was it possible to correctly understand the events in the GDR and the Soviet Union and draw the necessary conclusions. "Our perspective is that we are entering a long period of revolutionary upheavals. There will, of course, be ups and downs. There can also be setbacks, even serious setbacks. What is absolutely excluded is any rapid solution to the historical questions thrown up by the collapse of post war social relations. These issues can only be resolved within the arena of international class struggle." 123

216. The International Committee devoted considerable attention to the problem of socialist culture and the development of a socialist consciousness amongst workers. It undertook a systematic struggle against the post-Soviet school of historical falsification and historians such as Martin Malia, Richard Pipes and Dmitri Volkogonov, who sought to corroborate the thesis that socialism had failed by falsifying the history of the Russian Revolution. In this work, the IC collaborated closely with the Russian historian Vadim Rogovin, who, in his seven volume work on the Trotskyist Left Opposition, clearly demonstrated that there was a progressive alternative to Stalinism. At the same time, the IC expanded its work on cultural questions and sought to revive the intellectual traditions of the Left Opposition, which took such issues seriously. To this end, Mehring Verlag published new editions of Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* and *Problems of Everyday Life*, as well as the first German edition of *Art as the Cognition of Life* by Aleksandr Voronsky.

XXVI. The bankruptcy of reformist and national organizations

217. The liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy

was a manifestation of an international phenomenon. On January 4, 1992, just over a week after the formal dissolution of the USSR, David North explained: "All over the world the working class is confronted with the fact that the trade unions, parties and even states which they created in an earlier period have been transformed into the direct instruments of imperialism. The days are over when the bureaucracies "mediated" the class struggle and played the role of buffer between the classes. Though the bureaucracies generally betrayed the historical interests of the working class, they still, in a limited sense, served its daily practical needs; and, to that extent, "justified" their existence as leaders of working class organizations. That period is over. The bureaucracy cannot play any such independent role in the present period." 124

218. That was valid for the Stalinist and reformist parties and for the trade unions. Their program, the suppression of class conflict by means of social reforms, failed due to globalization, and they openly placed themselves in opposition to the elementary interests of the working class. The trade unions were no longer, even in the broadest sense of the word, "workers' organizations". They wrested no more concessions from the employers and the government, but, rather, forced workers to make concessions in order to strengthen national competitiveness and attract capital. During the reunification of Germany, the DGB and its affiliated trade unions strangled every attempt at resistance against privatisation and factory closures and co-operated closely with the Treuhand agency (responsible for privatisation). "The trade unions, together with the churches, ensured protests did not become radicalised", Franz Steinkühler, chairman of the Metalworkers Union, later boasted. His deputy Klaus Zwickel spoke of the "dangerous high-wire act", which the trade union had undertaken. "If we had not done so, I am convinced that violence or political extremism would have taken over." 125 Later, the trade unions assisted in the transfer of low wages from East to West Germany. Since then, every plan for rationalization and staff cuts such as by the car maker Opel has carried the signature of the trade unions and their works councils.

219. The SPD, and above all its chairman Willy Brandt, supported the reunification without reservation. In the following years in the states and regions, it competed with the CDU and the FDP to lower the living standards of workers. And in 1998, when the SPD took office for the first time in 16 years, it introduced the Agenda 2010 program, the most comprehensive welfare cuts since the founding of the Federal Republic. Chancellor Schröder had the support of large sections of the bourgeoisie, who thought the Kohl government was no longer capable of leading such a frontal attack against the working class. Likewise in foreign policy, the SPD-Green coalition carried out a radical change of course, deploying German troops to international theatres of war for the first time since the country's defeat in World War II.

220. In 1990, the BSA definitively abandoned the tactic of calling for electoral votes for the SPD or placing socialist demands on it. This was explained in its 1993 perspectives document: "The BSA has always regarded as its foremost task the need to break the working class from the influence of the SPD, which has been, for many decades, the most important mechanism for the maintenance of bourgeois rule in the Federal Republic. ... In the elaboration of its tactics, however, the BSA was obliged to recognise that the SPD was still identified in the working class with social reforms. ... Today, holding to such a tactic would be misplaced. The SPD has completely transformed itself from a bourgeois reformist party into a right-wing bourgeois party. A call for the casting of votes for the SPD, or placing demands on the SPD to take power would, under these circumstances, only contribute to extending the death agony of this bankrupt party and prevent the working class from carrying out the necessary political re-orientation." 126

221. The same perspectives document declared, with regard to the trade unions: "The destruction of the trade unions by the bureaucracy is far

advanced, and any conception that the path of the working class must proceed through the old reformist organizations only serves to chain workers to the rotting corpse of the trade unions.” 127 In the current economic crisis, the reactionary character of the trade unions has been even more evident. While the banks have attempted to shift the consequences of their unrestrained speculative transactions upon the working class, the trade unions openly place themselves on their side and suppress every genuine mobilization of the working class. Both the rescue packages for the banks and the government savings programs have been supported by the majority of trade unions. The struggle against these attacks can only be developed further in a systematic fight against union suppression.

222. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the International Committee also undertook a thorough examination of its attitude towards the national movements and the right of national self-determination. Numerous nationalistic and separatist movements were emerging, demanding their own national states. Multinational states, which had been relatively stable under the conditions of the post-war period, were torn apart by national, ethnic and religious tensions, stoked, in the main, by imperialist powers prosecuting their own interests. Thus Germany and the US supported the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and the US regarded the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to expand its influence into the Caucasus and Central Asia. The growth of separatist movements, however, also had objective causes. Globalization provided “an objective impulse for a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states. Globally-mobile capital has given smaller territories the ability to link themselves directly to the world market. Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have become the new models of development. A small coastal enclave, possessing adequate transportation links, infrastructure and a supply of cheap labor may prove a more attractive base for multinational capital than a larger country with a less productive hinterland.” 128

223. The International Committee opposed these separatist movements and counterpoised to them the international unity of the working class. Their goal was not to unite different peoples in a common struggle against imperialism, as progressive national movements had once sought to carry out in India and China, but rather the fragmentation of existing states in the interests of local exploiters. Far from embodying the democratic aspirations of the oppressed masses, they served to split the working class. The stereotyped repetition of the phrase “for the right of nations to self-determination” could not replace a concrete analysis of these movements. The International Committee stressed: “It has often been the case in the history of the Marxist movement that formulations and slogans which had a progressive and revolutionary content in one period take on an entirely different meaning in another. National self-determination presents just such a case. The right to self-determination has come to mean something very different from the way in which Lenin defined it more than eighty years ago. It is not only the Marxists who have advanced the right to self-determination, but the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries and the imperialists themselves.” 129

224. The clarification of the demand for self-determination and the associated struggle against the petty-bourgeois nationalists strengthened the Fourth International’s internationalist program. The International Committee clearly disassociated itself from the numerous ex-lefts and ex-radicals, who—like the Greens—supported, in the name of the right of nations to self-determination, the imperialist bloodbath in the Balkans and in other regions of the world. The analysis of the International Committee confirmed that a genuine internationalist program for the working class could be developed only on the basis of the theory of permanent revolution.

To be continued

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