

Berlin state elections: Lively debate at PSG election meeting

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For more than four weeks, members and supporters of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG- Socialist Equality Party), have been collecting voter signatures to gain ballot status for the PSG in the forthcoming elections to the Berlin state legislature.

The PSG will be running its own statewide slate of five candidates. Under current election law, because the party is not yet represented in the state legislature, it must collect 2,200 signatures of registered voters, of which each must be officially certified.

Most of the signatures have been collected outside job centres and in residential neighbourhoods. This has often led to lengthy discussions about the programme of the PSG. There is also an election campaign meeting held every Friday evening to discuss political developments and exchange opinions and experiences.

At last week's meeting, in addition to PSG members and sympathizers, a number of those who had signed the ballot forms also came along. There were two brief presentations, followed by a lively discussion about current political issues.

In the first presentation, PSG member Wolfgang Weber spoke about the crisis in Greece. The crisis of the euro and the growing opposition to austerity measures demanded by the banks had also played a significant role during the campaign to collect voter signatures. The presentation included important facts that contradicted the prevailing propaganda about the alleged "lazy Greeks" who were "sleeping in the social safety net" provided by German hand-outs.

Weber stressed that Greece's accession to the EU and the introduction of the euro had neither significantly benefited working people nor improved the infrastructure of this still largely agrarian country. In contrast, the international banks and large corporations have profited greatly from it. The current debt crisis and the threat of state bankruptcy are not a result of "national mismanagement" but a direct result of the international financial crisis of 2008 and the criminal machinations of the international banks.

In the second presentation, a PSG supporter who has lived

in Greece for 18 months described the situation of working people in the country. Wages are on average about half as high as in Germany, but prices and rents are the same, or in some cases even higher. Unemployment benefits are paid only for twelve months. Over the last years, the unions have lost support (and members); apart from some more or less symbolic actions, they have done nothing to defend working people against the harsh measures taken by the government. Disdain for them has increased so much that on some demonstrations union members have not wished to be recognised as such.

In the ensuing discussion, several questions were raised and the discussion developed about the political views of the PSG.

One visitor asked why the campaign, as part of the Berlin elections, was discussing Greece in such depth, which led to a lively discussion about the nature of the international economic and financial crisis.

A PSG member stressed that the current global crisis was not simply an economic downturn, but a fundamental historical crisis of the capitalist system. Because of the international network of banks (mainly through credit default swaps) the collapse of the US mortgage market and Lehman Brothers in 2008 had shaken the global financial system to its foundations. The major banks in all countries had suffered enormous losses, which had been offset by the governments in the form of various "bailout" measures.

By passing these private debts on to the state, some southern European countries, like Greece, had embarked on a downward spiral because of their already ailing finances and weak economy. Financial speculators and the big international banks, supported by the American rating agencies, were exploiting this situation—following the logic of the profit system—to demand higher interest rates on their state debts, and so squeeze every last cent out of these countries. This financial looting has driven Greece to the edge of bankruptcy.

This illuminates two crucial aspects of the current situation: First, the international character of the crisis,

which determines both economic and political events around the world, and in which all countries are inextricably connected. For example, the EU “bailout” of Greece (in which the funds that flow to Athens pass through the coffers of the international banks) is also funded from the taxes paid by workers in Berlin.

Second, what is happening in Greece is setting the path for further developments in Germany and other European countries. While previous austerity measures have led to a cut in living standards, the inevitable state bankruptcies in southern Europe, and the consequent collapse of the euro in its present form, will lead to huge economic and social dislocation, including revolutionary uprisings.

Another question that arose was: Where does the PSG differ from other parties?

A previous election campaign meeting had also discussed the role of the Left Party, which during ten years in the Berlin Senate (state government) had pushed through anti-social policies in the interest of the banks and large corporations.

The Left Party and the other establishment parties claim that capitalism can be reformed and made a more humane social order; this is refuted by ever-increasing cuts in programmes and social services. In contrast, the PSG stands in the Marxist tradition, which bases its perspective on the fact that the internal contradictions of capitalism produce catastrophic consequences.

The wars of the past hundred years, which brought about unimaginable suffering for millions of people, are not an exception but rather the result of fundamental contradictions of capitalism that still exist today. The present wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya point the way to new and greater wars of a global character.

Moreover, capitalism is now showing its true face in the growth of unprecedented social inequality. The gulf between the super-rich and the poorest people in the world is now greater than at the time of the decadent Louis XIV, the so-called “Sun King” in the seventeenth century. The contradictions within capitalism are not diminishing but becoming greater, and leading to more and worse disasters (including ecological ones—e.g., the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and Fukushima). Only the elimination of capitalism can guarantee humanity a future worth living.

As the German section of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, the political axis of the PSG is socialist internationalism. For the PSG and its sister parties, the most important borders run not between states, but between classes. Capitalism and finance capital have long made outdated the framework of the nation-state system.

The question of the size and strength of the working class

also played a role in the discussion.

It became clear in the discussion that the face of the working class has changed in the last decades, leading many to the erroneous view that there was no longer a working class in the classical sense. That is wrong. A person does not have to wear blue overalls and stand at a workbench in order to be a worker. Today, the working class includes all those people in capitalist society who cannot rely on their wealth and property but are forced to sell their labour power in order to survive. Whether this is manual work or intellectual work is immaterial.

Worldwide, the number of industrial workers has increased by over 500 million in the past 15 years, mainly in Asia but also in Africa and South America. The globalization of capitalism has thus created a huge additional international revolutionary potential.

The question of why previous revolutions were not successful triggered a discussion about the importance of a revolutionary party and leadership. The revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt have brought down the dictators in these countries, but they have not improved the living conditions of the working class. The financial aristocracy still prevails, supported by the military.

The reason for this lies mainly in the absence of a revolutionary leadership, to which the entire work of the PSG is dedicated—the building of such a leadership as an international, socialist party.

The meeting concluded by discussing how those who had come into contact with the PSG through the election campaign and are attracted by its programme can contribute to its development. To this end, volunteers signed up to help in further campaign teams and a successful collection was held.



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