

Berlin election: SEP rally calls for nationalization of the banks

Our reporters
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Last Saturday, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) held its third rally in its Berlin city election campaign. The rally, held at Kottbusser Tor in Berlin's Kreuzberg district, was called under the demand: "Neither national solutions nor Euro-bonds. Expropriate the banks!"

In the days before, the demand to expropriate the banks encouraged much discussion at PSG information tables, striking a chord with many Berliners. PSG election supporters reported how people often described their own daily experiences of the plundering of society by the financial markets.

The first speaker at the rally was PSG member Johannes Schott. He began his speech by stating, "All the official parties subordinate themselves to the dictatorship of the banks. Not the PSG!" The PSG fights for the nationalisation of the banks, Schott continued, as a precondition for the democratic organization of the economy. "We demand that those in the boardrooms of the banks who are responsible for the financial and economic crisis be brought before the courts and are held accountable for their criminal acts."

Passersby stopped to listen to the speaker, applauding or signalling their agreement by demonstratively nodding. Many took a leaflet or sought more information at the PSG stall.

Schott spoke about the recent turmoil on the international markets. "The ruling elite react to these developments by preparing further attacks on the working class," he said. Previous austerity measures cutting spending on health, education, social programmes and culture are still not enough for them. The bourgeoisie is determined to push the entire burden of the crisis onto the general population, destroying all remaining social gains that have historically been fought for by the working class. Schott explained that the working class must prepare for big social struggles, such as those which have developed in Egypt, Greece and most recently in England.

Many passersby supported the demands of the PSG for the expropriation of the banks. But some found it was difficult to imagine how this could be implemented.

One such case is Jonathan, who is from England and has lived in Berlin for three years where he is researching German and Austrian architecture. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed him at the rally. Jonathan started by talking about

the youth riots in England.

Jonathan: "Of course, I'm not for meaningless riots, but the harsh reactions of the politicians were not right. I think Labour's reaction was a cheek, even if it did not come unexpectedly. I read Cameron's calls for water cannons to be deployed, but find it unbelievable this was also demanded by Ken Livingstone [a supposedly "left" politician]. I have posted a picture on Facebook of the water cannon being used [against protestors] at Stuttgart-21 because I am against the calls by Cameron."

WSWS: "What do you think about the demonstration by the PSG and the demand for the expropriation of the banks?"

Jonathan: "I think the demonstration and the demand to 'expropriate the banks' is basically a good idea, and I agree with it, but it will never happen."

WSWS: "Why?"

Jonathan: "I can't say why, I don't know. The expropriation of the banks is a very difficult thing to carry out, because you have to find an international solution for it. There is no other way. But the institutions to do this don't exist or do not function. Precisely because the banks receive support from different governments, I don't see any solution on a national basis."

WSWS: "This is certainly true. That's a key part of our campaign. We are part of an international party, which says that the mass of the people needs to intervene into political events. Only such a movement can exercise social control over the banks."

Jonathan: "That's right. I see myself as a socialist, and would like to see more unity on the left. What the PSG says is absolutely correct, but nothing can be achieved without the left or socialist parties coming to some kind of agreement."

WSWS: "Which parties would you describe as 'left-wing'? With whom should we collaborate? For example, is the Left Party in Berlin 'left-wing'?"

Jonathan: "The SPD is like Labour in Britain and certainly can't be counted. But perhaps the Left Party could."

WSWS: "The Left Party is the successor to the Stalinists. Here in Berlin, they have been an official party of state for the last ten years and defend capitalism. Why should we get into bed with the Left Party, or expect anything of them?"

Jonathan: (*thinking*) "No idea. I have no answer."

WSWS: "Can you fight for socialism with the Left Party?"

Jonathan: "Up to a point, perhaps. Your programme is certainly quite correct. But I also agree with some points of the Left Party."

WSWS: “Which points?”

Jonathan: “I can’t give a concrete example. Nothing comes to mind.”

WSWS: “The Left Party has even supported Sarrazin for seven years.”

Jonathan: “But that’s how politics works. There have to be compromises in a coalition. That’s the problem with democracy.”

WSWS: “But where is the democracy for the majority of people in Berlin? Should we make compromises with the banks, like the Left Party?”

Jonathan: “But you can’t let the banks go bankrupt.”

WSWS: “Why not? The bankers say to society: We need so many millions income every month to finance our villas and cars. Where can the compromise be between the bankers and society? The only result of a compromise would be that the bankers demanded even more!”

Jonathan: “Yeah. So I would also say that I agree completely with the demands of the PSG for the expropriation of the banks, but I don’t believe that the demand can be implemented immediately. Perhaps the formulation using the word ‘expropriation’ is too hard.”

WSWS: “When we raise the demand, we mean the rich and super rich. We don’t want to attack the accounts of small or medium savers. But social control is necessary. The books of the banks must be opened up, at the same time, the sums made through speculation should be confiscated.”

Jonathan: “I can support you in all this. But my fear is that there is too little unity on the left. There is no mass movement currently; it still has to be created.”

WSWS: “Mass movements arise out of the contradictions of capitalism and we can see them already in Egypt, Greece or Spain. What matters is equipping them with a clear international and socialist perspective.”

Jonathan: “I agree with that.”

The second speaker at the rally was Susanne Salamah, PSG candidate for the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives. She spoke about the experiences of Berliners with banking scandals and the policies of the Left Party favouring the interests of the banks.

For example, when the Left Party and the SPD took office in city hall in 2002 they pledged to safeguard the deposits of the speculators. “€1.75 billion was pumped into the ailing Bankgesellschaft, rescuing rich property investors,” said Salamah. The SPD-Left Party city government provided guarantees totalling €21.6 billion. Even before the international finance crisis, the Left Party and SPD had showed how they implement policies in the interests of the banks. The consequences of rescuing the speculators are radical austerity measures and the spread of poverty throughout Berlin.

Another passerby who spoke with the WSWS was Leonie. She has worked as a freelance writer in radio for six years and lives in Berlin.

She thought the demand for the expropriation of the banks was “absolutely right”. However, she too “couldn’t really imagine how

this could be done,” and said she didn’t know anyone else apart from the PSG who was raising this demand. “Ultimately, in our present system of society none of the rulers have an interest in implementing this demand”, Leonie said. She concluded that therefore the PSG regarded itself as a revolutionary party.

Leonie expressed scepticism about the building of a new party. She said: “My un-dogmatic heart says no [laughs], but *realpolitik* means that without leadership nothing can happen.” In her opinion, the main problem currently was that those who are exploited, including both workers and the unemployed, don’t recognise their own power.

Some people came to the rally because they had seen PSG leaflets or posters, including Elizabeth, a politics student. Elisabeth had seen some PSG posters and wanted to find out more about the party’s campaign. As with other passersby, she too supported the demand for the expropriation of the banks, but also could not imagine how it could be implemented.

WSWS: “What do you think about the demand for the expropriation of the banks?”

Elizabeth: “The demand is obvious, but somewhat exaggerated. In light of all the bank rescues in recent years I can understand it, otherwise I wouldn’t be here today.”

WSWS: “Do the establishment politicians have an answer to the euro crisis?”

Elizabeth: “I don’t think so. I too see that neither a national road nor the Euro-bonds are a solution. But the whole system today is so dependent on the banks that expropriation would result in complete chaos. And also because politics are dependent on the banks. The single demand to expropriate the banks wouldn’t solve the problem and you need more complex approaches.”

WSWS: “Indeed, the expropriation of the banks would only be one point, and you can’t separate this from the whole struggle against capitalism.”

Elizabeth: “Exactly. I agree.”

WSWS: “Can we say that capitalism has failed?”

Elizabeth: “Yes, to some extent one can say that. There are many people who no longer believe in capitalism; who no longer believe that all human beings can live as equals in this system. But at my university, I only learn stuff that is pro-capitalist.”

WSWS: “Do you think that building a new party is necessary today?”

Elizabeth: “Yes, I see it like that.”



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