

Berlin election: SEP holds rally to demand affordable housing

Our correspondents
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On September 3, the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), held its third rally in connection with its current campaign for the Berlin state election. The rally was held in the working class district of Berlin, Neukölln, and was devoted to the issue of housing policy in the city. Following the rally, a PSG demonstration through the district demanded action against rent increases and the privatization of housing.

Various tenants' initiatives and neighborhood groups had also mobilized for a demonstration on the same day. The organizers of this event, however, had demanded that "no political parties" be involved in their event, arguing this was the way to establish "the broadest possible front" against exorbitant rents.

The PSG denounced this argument as a political fraud and distributed its own leaflet condemning this blatant act of political censorship. The organizers of the "rent-stop" event included trade unionists and members of the Left Party, Greens, Social Democrats and ex-left radicals. They all have good reasons to downplay or conceal their own party membership. They are all desperately seeking to cover up their own role in implementing the punitive cuts and austerity measures introduced by the SPD-Left Party Senate during the past ten years.

During the past decade the Left Party in particular had played a very active role in the privatization of both housing stock and state run energy companies. The consequence has been a drastic increase in housing costs for tenants. Under the Senate housing has become increasingly expensive for those receiving welfare benefits with many recipients forced to quit their accommodation and find cheaper lodgings.

The ban on parties served to conceal the political responsibility of those groups involved in the organization of the demonstration for the policies of the Senate. The aim was to encourage illusions in the politically inexperienced that the Senate could be pushed to the left by "pressure from the street". In fact, one of the main lessons of the rule of the SPD-Left Senate is precisely the bankruptcy of this perspective and the need for workers to build a new, independent party to defend their rights.

For all these reasons the PSG held its own rally. Even before the rally began, the Berlin authorities expressed their hostility by insisting that PSG members and campaign workers could not set up a book table in front of the Neukölln City Hall. The official, who put forward flimsy arguments to justify the ban, insisted that a phone call he had received a few minutes earlier from the district mayor, Buschkowsky, was "pure coincidence".

Despite these obstacles, the PSG went ahead with its rally and demonstration. The first speaker, Johannes Schott, pointed out that the protests against rent increases and welfare cuts was part of a larger international development. He recalled in this connection the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the mass strikes in the US, the protests in Greece, Spain, Portugal, the mass demonstrations in Israel and the youth revolt in Britain.

The background for this development was the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s. The ruling class all over the world had responded to this crisis with a campaign to reverse all of the historic gains of the working class won in struggle.

All parties and organizations that defended the capitalist system worked closely together to enforce these social attacks—irrespective of whether they were nominally left or right-wing. They are all stakeholders and political advocates of a tiny, wealthy elite.

Berlin is the best example in this respect. The policies of the Left Party-SPD Senate have inaugurated a social disaster in recent years involving a massive redistribution of wealth from the working population to the rich.

Austerity measures were enforced by the Senate in close collaboration with major trade unions, such as the public sector Verdi union. The unions, which in the main were headed by members of the Left Party and the SPD, had systematically sabotaged one strike after another in Berlin to prevent a political struggle against the Senate. Just this May, Verdi sold out the strike of more than 10,000 employees at the Berlin Charité hospital.

Schott also addressed the political content of the “rent-stop” demonstration held on the same day. The organizers were desperate to prevent a discussion on the need for a new party. The stance “no political parties” was not only undemocratic, it had a clear political goal, i.e., to protect the Senate and prevent the emergence of a conscious political opposition.

A glimpse of the supporters for the rent-stop demonstration revealed a long list of politicians from the Left Party, the SPD and the unions who are directly responsible for the cuts and rent increases. They prefer not to appear publicly but rather disguise themselves behind various organizations and initiatives.

At the beginning of his contribution, PSG chairman Ulrich Rippert highlighted the fundamental difference between the PSG and all other organizations participating in the Berlin election. “In contrast to all other parties we do not accept the dictatorship of the banks. Not a single social problem can be solved without breaking the power of the banks.”

The current economic crisis had not fallen from the sky. The billions paid out worldwide to rescue the banks had ripped huge holes in government budgets. These deficits were now to be filled by massive savings programs.

The claim by billionaires that ordinary people are living beyond their means has led to the closure of schools, libraries, day care centers and swimming pools, while the living standards of working people have been reduced drastically. In the enforcement of these measures the arrogance of the financial elite has only been matched by the cowardice and corruption of bourgeois politicians.

Rippert repeated the demand of the PSG, that those bankers and politicians responsible for the financial crisis be held accountable and punished. He also pointed out that mere protest actions were insufficient to bring about real change. The financial elite was determined to dismantle democratic rights and undertake dictatorial measures to assert its own interests.

The aggressiveness of the ruling class was demonstrated in Afghanistan and Libya. “They are quite prepared to use the same war measures here as they have employed in Libya”, Rippert warned, and stressed that major class struggles were on the agenda in Germany. A storm is brewing in Berlin. Such a mass rebellion is not only inevitable but also urgently necessary to put an end to the existing profit system. “Only the intervention of hundreds of thousands into politics will really change anything.”

In this respect it was necessary to draw from the lessons of history, Rippert stated. Such a mass protest must pursue a clear

goal based on assuming power and establishing a workers government which put the interests and needs of working people above the drive for profits. This required a party based on a revolutionary program. This is the PSG, the German section of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 as the world party of socialist revolution.

Rippert encouraged the audience to participate in the building of the PSG and vote for the party on 18 September to set a clear vote against the dictatorship of the banks.

The subsequent demonstration was headed by PSG candidates and representatives of the ISSE, carrying a banner with the key message of the campaign: “Build an international revolutionary party”. Other participants held signs opposing racism and war. Another banner read: “Neither a national road, nor Eurobonds: expropriate the banks”.

The PSG demonstrators marched to the Hermannplatz where protesters were gathering for the rent-stop demo. Organizers of the march then sought to prevent PSG speakers from addressing the demonstrators by playing loud music, once again showing their hostility to a socialist alternative.

Leaflets calling for a vote for the Left Party were being distributed at the rent-stop event—in clear contravention of the “no-political parties” stance of the organizers. The Socialist Alternative Voran (SAV) grouping, which operates inside the Left Party and supports its election campaign in Berlin, was also allowed to set up an information table at the rent-stop rally despite the official ban.

Representatives of the PSG opposed this farce and distributed its own statement objecting to the attempt at political censorship and calling for the building of a political alternative to challenge the SPD-Left Party Senate.



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