

The significance of the 40-year struggle by the German Trotskyists

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On September 17, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party—PSG) held a European workers rally against racism, war and social cutbacks at the conclusion of the party's election campaign in Berlin. Representatives of the PSG and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) spoke on the crisis of capitalism, the programme of the PSG and the significance of the PSG election campaign.

Today we are posting the concluding speech by Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, on the historic programme of the PSG.

Our meeting this afternoon and the speeches already given make clear that we have made important political progress. Anyone who has participated in our election campaign in recent weeks and months and followed its progress on our web site will surely agree that it has been a very intense political campaign, which has drawn considerable attention.

We were the only party that challenged the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Left Party Senate in Berlin from the left, exposing its anti-social policies and relentlessly opposing its reactionary politics. We were able to do this only on the basis of our long history of systematic struggle against all forms of opportunism and nationalism.

What distinguishes us from other parties is that we have never adapted our politics to fleeting trends. We have never put short-term organisational and tactical initiatives above political principles. In this campaign, our task was once again to speak the truth and advance our socialist perspective.

In response to the crisis, all the bourgeois parties—including the Left Party—are closing ranks. It does not make the slightest difference who wins the election on Sunday and who takes over as mayor. They all follow the same policy dictated by the banks.

At the same time, the petty-bourgeois pseudo-leftist groups, the remnants of the fake-Trotskyist Pabloites, the SAV (attached to the Militant Tendency), the state-capitalist Marx21 group, Workers' Power, etc., have all closed ranks with the Left Party and helped organise its election campaign. They are part of the bourgeois order and offer their services to participate in future governments.

We stood on the other side. We have directly addressed the problems of working people and stressed that not a single social problem can be solved without breaking the dictatorship of the banks. This requires in turn an independent movement of the working class and a political break with the Left Party and the trade unions—i.e., the building of a new workers' party based on the political lessons of past class struggles and which fights for an international socialist programme.

If we pose the question—what have we achieved?—it should be noted first and foremost: We have made it clear that there is a party that opposes the

entire political establishment and relentlessly exposes the opportunism of the Left Party, that there is a party with the courage and the ability to oppose the dictatorship of the banks and that consistently represents the interests of the working class.

The political polarisation that took place in this campaign—on the one side, all parties from right to left, together with the trade unions; on the other side, ourselves with an international socialist programme—was very noticeable and even surprised some of our supporters. This development is very significant—it is part of a class differentiation that is now progressing very rapidly.

We have often stressed that an independent movement of the working class is necessary. Such a movement, however, does not arise simply from spontaneous protests and struggles, but requires a political programme directed opposed to the Left Party and its supporters. We have popularised and discussed precisely such a programme during the election campaign.

That was very important and has far-reaching significance. We have made clear that the future political development of the working class is closely related to the building of our party. Because the strength of our party resides in the fact that in the course of our history we have fought against every form of opportunism and nationalism.

I want to explain something. Today, we are not only concluding a successful election campaign, but also celebrating—almost to the day—the 40th anniversary of the founding of our party.

When we founded the Socialist Workers' League (BSA)—the forerunner of the PSG [Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—Socialist Equality Party]—in September 1971, the world looked very different. The crimes of the Nazis lay just 26 years in the past—not much longer than the period since the end of East Germany. But at that time, nobody in mainstream politics addressed such historical questions. They preferred to act as if nothing had happened. Instead, they claimed that capitalism had been reformed and that the “social market economy” meant prosperity for all. And indeed, there was an economic boom during that period.

But we rejected the illusions attached to boom. When in the summer of 1971, the US government abolished gold backing for the dollar and announced the end of the Bretton Woods system, we explained that this represented an intensification of the historical crisis of capitalism. We were ridiculed from all sides.

We based our arguments at the time on Lenin who had shown at the beginning of the last century that capitalism cannot solve a single social problem and that the domination of finance capital inevitably leads to dictatorship and war. We were condemned for living in the past and told

that such an analysis was completely irrelevant today.

But the course of developments has proved us right. Is there the slightest doubt today that the historical crisis of capitalism, which led to the great catastrophes of the past century, is once again back on the agenda?

Even the bourgeois press refers to the dictatorship of the banks, which drive global governments before them. When the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, declares that Greece had finally to “deliver”, and that there would be no additional money paid without further cuts in social spending, then what’s speaking is clearly the voice of class struggle and dictatorship.

There is no doubt that we were correct in our analysis. Even in the boom years of the 1970s, capitalism never overcome its historic contradictions. The extent of the present crisis far exceeds the Great Depression of the 1930s and once again threatens to lead to dictatorship and war.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many workers had considerable illusions in capitalism and believed they could force the SPD to represent their interests. I remember well a great strike movement in September 1969, by steelworkers in the Ruhr district and the Saarland. They were able to obtain a large pay rise—despite opposition from the IG Metall trade union. At the end of the same month, Willy Brandt was elected chancellor, and many workers were convinced they could dictate terms to the SPD government. A saying of the times was “We will keep Willy Brandt and the SPD within the range of our whip.”

We decisively rejected any illusions in the SPD. We were fully aware of the disastrous consequences of the betrayal of 1914, when the SPD agreed to war loans for the Kaiser and thereby led millions of workers to the slaughter of World War I.

We also knew that Lenin and the Bolsheviks had only been able to prepare and carry out the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the first workers’ state in a relentless battle against the opportunism of the SPD.

We named our first party newspaper, which we published in the spring of 1972, after Lenin’s “The Spark” [*Iskra*]. We studied the Russian Revolution, its enormous historical significance, and knew very well that the political perspective of this revolution had been most accurately formulated by Leon Trotsky, based on his theory of permanent revolution.

Trotsky had stated that given the world crisis of capitalism, the democratic tasks arising in the struggle against the Tsarist regime could only be resolved by the working class, and only on the basis of a socialist programme. The Russian Revolution was, in fact, the beginning of the world revolution.

The future of Russia depended entirely on the development of the international revolution. One can therefore with some justification assert that the fate of the Russian Revolution was decided finally not in Moscow or Petrograd, but rather here in Berlin.

It was a social democratic government that, with the help of the army, drowned the November 1918-January 1919 revolution in blood. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered along with thousands of revolutionary workers. No power on earth will ever be able to erase this crime from the history of the SPD.

We understood the connection between the betrayal of the SPD, the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the terror against the Trotskyists

and the fascist calamity.

It was the treachery of the SPD and the defeat of the 1918-1919 Revolution that led to the isolation of the Russian Revolution. This isolation and the powerful pressure from capitalist countries created conditions in the first workers’ state for the emergence of a privileged bureaucracy, which under Stalin took power within the party and the state, and murdered the Left Opposition and an entire generation of Marxists in the course of the Moscow Trials. It was this mass murder of the Trotskyists and the political beheading of the working class that paved the way for the Nazi terror.

We were powerfully struck by the principled and courageous struggle of the Trotskyists against both Stalinism and fascism. They were adamant in their struggle and did not hesitate to give their lives to defend the perspective of socialist internationalism.

When we founded the BSA in September 1971, we knew we wanted to build a section of the Fourth International. Our goal was to re-establish the historical continuity of Marxism in a country in which it had been suppressed by Stalinism and National Socialism [Nazism]. In order to defend this international socialist programme, a series of bitter confrontations with all parties and political tendencies was necessary.

Initially, our work was concentrated in Frankfurt am Main. During the same period, Joschka Fischer [future Green foreign minister] was active in the city as a “street fighter” and squatter. His policy was entirely opportunistic and characterised by a deep hostility towards the working class—mirrored today by so-called autonomous groups or “non-dogmatic leftists” who can be found in the Berlin suburbs of Kreuzberg and Neukölln. What has become of Fischer and his friend Daniel Cohn-Bendit? Today, they rank as the most avid and reactionary representatives of German imperialism.

We fought against Maoism, and all those who glorified Stalin and Mao Zedong. They also vehemently rejected the working class, describing the students as the revolutionary vanguard and violently attacking us. In the 1970s, the KBW [Communist League—West Germany] was one of the largest Maoist organisations in Germany. What became of it? It formally dissolved itself in 1985, and its former cadre now dominate the leadership of the Greens. Former KBW member Jürgen Trittin, who took over from Fischer as leader of the Green Party, has moved so far to the right that he is treated as a potential candidate for German chancellor.

We fought against the Pabloites—i.e., those who described themselves as Trotskyists and simultaneously defended the Stalinist bureaucracy. In the 1980s, they all became ardent supporters of Mikhail Gorbachev and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. Following the restoration of capitalism in the USSR and eastern Europe, many of them assumed senior positions in politics, economy and the media.

Today, they are important props of imperialism. I will mention only a few of them: Harald Wolf, economic affairs senator of the Left Party here in Berlin; Volker Ratzmann, chairman of the Greens in the Berlin Senate; Andrea Fischer, former federal health minister, now a lobbyist for the pharmaceutical industry and once again a leading candidate for the Greens; Sonja Mikich, television presenter. They all have made a career and are now key pillars of bourgeois rule against the working class.

Can there be any doubt about the significance of the polemics and conflicts against the politics of the Pabloites and all other forms of opportunism and nationalism? Where would we be today if we had failed

to undertake this task—for which we were continually denounced as “sectarians”?

In the course of this long and unrelenting struggle, we defended Marxism, the international socialist programme, which is so decisive today for the working class.

To put it somewhat polemically: We have reached a state of affairs where no one dares to write a serious article about our party, because they are all afraid that any mention of our programme will become a source of attraction for broad sections of workers and a platform for revolutionary struggles.

Therefore, it is no exaggeration and is not merely wishful thinking when we say that the political development of the working class is closely bound up with the building and the development of the influence of our party.

Regardless of how many votes we get in this campaign, we have made an important political step forward and laid the foundations for a new stage in building the party. For that I wish to thank all of those who have devoted so much time and energy to our campaign in recent weeks—in some cases to the limits of their physical ability.

At the same time, I urge all of you who are not yet members of the PSG to use this opportunity today to become familiar with the programme and the historical tradition of our movement, and join our party.

The future of society will not be decided in the chancellor’s office, nor in the European Union Commission in Brussels. It will be decided by those who participate in building this party, take part in the work of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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