

# Trotskyist candidate in Berlin elections addresses European workers rally

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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.*

*We posted on September 21 the comments of Peter Schwarz, secretary of the ICFI and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.*

*The second contribution below is from Christoph Drier, one of the party's candidates in the Berlin election and a member of the PSG's executive committee.*

We made a big effort in this election campaign to bring our programme before broad layers of the population in Berlin. We released videos, wrote numerous articles, set up nearly 100 information tables, put up 6,000 posters and distributed well over 200,000 flyers. In all of our work, we stressed the need for a new international revolutionary workers' party.

We drew out the significance of such a vigorous public campaign directly from the political situation described by the previous speaker, Peter Schwarz. From the outset we undertook our campaign from an international perspective and viewed it as part of a European-wide effort conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The ongoing crisis of capitalism is producing an extreme intensification of class antagonisms. The crisis demonstrates not only how the ruling class dominates every aspect of social life, but also reveals its readiness to implement the most violent attacks on the working population since the Second World War to save its wealth and social system.

In one European country after another, the banks demand that governments undertake the destruction of previous social gains. The result in Greece is now hunger on the streets. At the same time, the war against Libya shows that the ruling elite is prepared to go to any lengths to defend its interests. Recalling the darkest period of colonial butchery, the ruling class regards the world as its geo-strategic chessboard.

And that's just the beginning. As Peter Schwarz noted, the crisis has only just begun to bite. One can observe the explosive manner in which the contradictions of capitalism, which led to such tragic consequences in the twentieth century, are breaking out anew. As Rosa Luxemburg remarked nine months after the outbreak of the First World War, mankind is faced with the alternative: socialism or barbarism.

There is the capitalist solution to the crisis, which is to destroy workers' social gains and pit one nation against another. This is incompatible with broad democratic rights and can only be enforced by dictatorial measures.

And there is the socialist solution to the crisis: the expropriation of the banks and corporations and their democratic control by the workers, the transformation of society in the interests of working people and the use of its wealth and resources for the good of all.

The socialist solution requires the independent intervention of workers in the political process—i.e., those who bear the burden of the crisis and face falling wages, layoffs and social cutbacks. We emphasised this repeatedly during the election campaign and were treated with hostility by representatives of the media time and again: We stressed, we do not fear a social explosion, but rather welcome it and seek to provide it with political orientation. Only the intervention of millions can end the autocratic power of the financial elite.

Therein lies the importance of our participation in the election. We want to build an international and revolutionary party that allows the working class to intervene in political events.

The situation is intensifying daily: Will Egyptian workers overthrow the junta, or will the military drown the strikes and protests in blood? Will British workers oppose the government, or will the ruling powers proceed to imprison an entire generation of young people? Will the imperialists invade and colonise other countries, or will they be challenged by the working class?

These are the questions that we want to discuss in more detail and which will be addressed in other contributions at this rally. I want to concentrate on highlighting our experiences in Berlin to illustrate the importance of our participation in the election and the necessity of building a new revolutionary party.

## The Berlin model

What we have experienced in the German capital in the last 10 years could well be termed the Berlin model, which is now being applied across Europe.

In 2001, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Left Party assumed power in Berlin, following the break-up of the previous "grand

coalition” of the SPD and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). For years, the latter parties had plundered the city treasury to reward friends and cronies. Among other things, it emerged that special funds had been set up for politicians and real estate sharks to guarantee them handsome profits at the expense of the taxpayer.

One of the first acts of the new “left” Senate was to secure this special fund and provide the bankrupt Berlin Bank Society with €21.6 billion in guarantees. This money was then recouped from the population. No other German state has implemented such massive cuts in social spending as Berlin under the SPD and Left Party Senate.

The Senate quit the federal employers’ association to enforce a 10 percent wage cut in public services and public transport. Some 150,000 flats have been privatised, the construction of new affordable housing has come to a stop, €75 million have been cut from the budget of the city’s universities and the right to free teaching materials abolished. The list goes on and on. In addition, the Senate expanded the surveillance of public spaces and restricted the right to demonstrate.

To enforce these unprecedented cuts, the Senate has utilised its close links with the trade union bureaucracy. In particular the public services union ver.di (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft—United Services Union) has functioned as the right-hand man of the administration and done what it could to assist the Senate in its attacks.

Let’s talk about public transport. Already by January 2005, ver.di accepted sharp cuts in wages and worsened working conditions for its transport members. When the Senate called for further cuts in the middle of the year, workers were furious. Ver.di was therefore forced to call a ballot for an indefinite strike.

Prior to the ballot, Senator Harald Wolf (Left Party) invited his old friend and ver.di chief Frank Bsirske to accompany him for a walk in the woods. For the workers of Berlin this walk has become symptomatic of the cooperation between the unions and the state. The outcome of this sylvan stroll was the immediate termination of the strike vote. A short time later, the result was clear: average wage cuts of 10 percent, plus the cancellation of holiday and Christmas bonuses.

In 2008, the union was forced to let off steam and organise an indefinite strike by some of its transport worker members. They made very sure, however, that this protest did not coincide with a strike by suburban rail workers, thereby guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of public transport in Berlin.

The result was that workers gained a wage increase far below the rate of inflation, which did not even compensate them for the wages they had lost during their strike. Two thirds of the membership in the ver.di public transport branch voted against this deal. Even so, the union pushed it through.

Similar pseudo-strikes occurred in the same year in the public service. Although 85 percent of the workforce voted for a permanent, all-out strike, ver.di staggered strike action by one occupational group after another and tried to demoralise workers. First, certain government agencies took strike action, then civil authority workers, then day care centers, etc., etc. The result once again was a wage cut in real terms.

This year, the union called off a strike at Berlin’s Charité hospital after only four days. Not only did ver.di leave one section of workers at the Charité-subsidary CFM—who carried on striking—in the lurch, it also bound the rest of the workforce to a ban on any industrial action for five years. To impose the deal, union officials resorted to all manner of

subterfuge and dirty tricks.

In close symbiosis with the unions, the Senate has implemented unprecedented cuts in social spending. The response, however, has been growing resistance by workers. This finds expression not only in the fact that many deals agreed to by the union bureaucracy have been rejected by a majority of members, but also in the collapse of the Left Party vote in recent elections. The party has lost half of its votes in the past 10 years.

The Berlin-based model would not have worked without the assiduous support from a number of petty bourgeois “left” organisations who sprang to the side of the Senate and sought to provide it with a “progressive” cover.

Five years ago, at the end of its first term in power, the Left Party had lost much of its credibility with workers. It was precisely at this moment that the activists of the International Socialist Tendency proffered their support. They dissolved their group into the Left Party, formed the network Marx21 and argued that the Left Party constituted a genuine alternative that could be pressured to the left.

Two years later, when the financial crisis broke out and the Left Party agreed in essence to the government-funded bailout of the banks, Socialist Alternative (SAV—attached to the International Militant Tendency) also dissolved itself into the Left Party. Previously, the group had denounced the Left Party; now it claimed that the latter had the potential to develop into a socialist workers’ party.

Since that time, the defence of the Left Party by these groups has taken increasingly bizarre forms. In one of its leaflets in the latest Berlin state election, the SAV criticises the profoundly anti-social policies implemented by the Left Party, only then, in the next breath, to call for a vote for the party in the election. In west Berlin, these organisations were largely responsible for the Left Party’s election campaign.

The unions could also rely on these groups when it came to selling out strikes. SAV member Carsten Becker played a leading role in calling off the recent Charité strike.

Confronted with growing resistance by workers to their open defence of the unions and the Senate, these fake left groups expanded their tactics. Now, they are trying to prevent a movement against the Berlin Senate, by organising protests in which any discussion of the betrayals of the Senate and the necessity for a socialist perspective is banned.

On September 3, these middle-class groups organised a demonstration against rent increases together with anarchist forces. Knowing very well that the Left Party would have been thrown out of the demonstration due to its housing policy over the last 10 years, the organisers imposed a ban on parties taking part in the protest. In the event, all those “left” organisations that had called for a vote for the Left Party, including the unions, took part in the demonstration. This is the last line of defence of Berlin’s Senate, the simple suppression of any discussion.

### **The importance of the PSG election campaign**

We chose Berlin as a European focal point for our campaign because the experience with the city’s model contains important lessons that now assume great international importance.

A clear class differentiation is emerging as class struggles break out and the crisis of capitalism intensifies. As Leon Trotsky noted in 1937, the revolution speaks the truth. “The revolution begins by calling things and social relations their real names.” He was writing on the eve of World War II and at a time when the Moscow Trials had exposed the counter-revolutionary character of Stalinism.

Today, we see how a whole layer of affluent middle-class intellectuals, trade union bureaucrats and party functionaries who regulated class compromise for decades is moving to the right at a breathtaking pace.

Five years ago, WASG (Labour and Social Justice—The Electoral Alternative) leader Lucy Redler was celebrated in the media and portrayed as a left alternative to the SPD-Left Senate. Today, nobody, apart from ourselves, challenges the Senate from the left. The entire official election campaign was deliberately stripped of any real political content and revolved around the question of who would share power with the Social Democratic mayor and enforce the cuts. The PSG is the only party that denounced the Senate from the left. For adopting this stance, the party was systematically censored in the media in spite of intensive campaigning.

Those who in the past criticised the Senate—albeit for purely tactical reasons—are today organising the election campaign of the Left Party. In times of need, they all close ranks against workers. These petty bourgeois groups are now the main prop for the extension of the Berlin model all over Europe.

For weeks, the SPD, Greens and Left Party had argued for Euro bonds and for a European economic policy that will enforce the dictates of the banks across Europe—independently of national parliaments and beyond any democratic control. Peer Steinbrück, a possible SPD candidate for chancellor, has argued that austerity measures are necessary in order to recapitalise the banks.

Such an economic policy would destroy the social gains of the European working class and could rely on the full support of the unions. And the petty bourgeois “left” groups have already made it clear that they are prepared to provide political backing for such a move on both a federal German and European level.

A number of these groups have already expressed their support for the imperialist war in Libya. The SAV has attacked the revolt of the British youth and lined up with the state. Just last week, it published on its web site a debate that included contributions advocating Euro bonds and fiscal consolidation.

The future Danish minority government will most likely be based directly on members of organisations of such “left” groups; in Egypt, the same forces are defending the military junta as the supposed “guardian of the revolution”.

These groups speak on behalf of definite social interests. Affluent sections of the middle class and the trade union bureaucracy are extremely hostile to any movement of workers. The more the crisis and class antagonisms deepen, the closer they move to the state. They play a key role in helping to suppress and prevent an independent working class movement.

That’s why we developed our campaign on the basis of challenging these tendencies. Whether the working class can play an independent role depends largely on whether it breaks from the old bureaucracies and turns toward a revolutionary perspective. That is what the petty bourgeois

pseudo-left groups are trying to avoid at all costs.

A political break with the old bureaucracies and reformist conceptions, however, does not simply emerge spontaneously from the struggles of workers. It requires a systematic struggle against all forms of middle-class protest politics and a revolutionary perspective that can only be drawn from the historical continuity of the Fourth International.

Therein lies the importance of the participation of the PSG in the election. In the election campaign, we have not only made our revolutionary programme available to broad sections of the working class for discussion. We have also advanced our analysis of the politics and role of the petty bourgeois tendencies. In so doing we have prepared independent action by workers.

Therefore, I urge all of you not to waste your vote tomorrow. All of the bourgeois parties will implement the dictates of the banks. A vote for the PSG, however, is a vote for an independent movement of workers, and an international revolutionary party.



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