

Berlin election: What lies behind the hype for the Pirate Party

Martin Nowak, Christoph Drier
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“No, we did not reckon with it in this form,” was the response by Andreas Baum, the leading candidate of the Pirate Party in the upcoming Berlin state election, when asked by a Berlin newspaper if the party had expected to achieve such a good rating in opinion polls. The party has been credited with between 4 and 5 percent electoral support. According to Baum, the main role in the party’s success in attracting voters was word of mouth and deliberate promotion by the media.

It was first founded in 2006 by young tech workers, based on the principle of campaigning for free access to digital culture and opposition to state surveillance.

A few weeks ago, it looked as if the Pirates were on the wane. In its federal programme, the party declared it would accept the German constitution and the principles of the free market economy. In addition, the Pirate Party had also recruited a number of washed-up politicians from established German political parties—the conservative Christian Democratic Union, the pro-business Free Democratic Party, and the nominally “left” Election Alternative (WASG). As a result, its membership began to decline in 2011.

The current national chairman, Sebastian Mink (a member of the CDU until 2004), and his deputy, Bernd Schloemer (academic director at the Federal Ministry of Defence and avowed supporter of former Interior Minister Gerhard Baum [FDP] and former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt [SPD]), both wish to situate the Pirates politically as a pro-business party. In its initial stages, the Pirates made a certain appeal to disaffected youth, but it has increasing oriented to affluent sections of the petty bourgeoisie.

Already in the fall of 2010, the majority of delegates at a Pirate Party congress opposed the inclusion into the party programme of a comprehensive social programme, opposing in particular demands for a minimum wage and an unconditional basic income. In the debate, such demands

were associated with the former Stalinist East Germany and denounced as “trench warfare from the 20th century”.

While the party sought to project an image of youthful rebellion, it became increasingly clear that the project was nothing more than an attempt to infuse new life into the thoroughly discredited right-wing traditions of German political liberalism.

The Berlin Regional Association is no exception in this respect. In a city with the highest unemployment in Germany, the Pirates will not get far by totally excluding social issues. To this end, the party has resorted to all sorts of tricks. While they have plastered the city with posters calling for secularism, a minimum wage and a basic income, they have attacked these conceptions in their election manifesto.

The programme declares that the party would support “a nationwide legal minimum wage”, but fails to specify any sum. The demand could therefore be fulfilled on the basis of a wage of €2 or €3 per hour.

The party is equally vague when it comes to its demand for an unconditional basic income that it would implement in the “medium term”. In the long term, such an income should amount to a “living wage” and replace the minimum wage. Here, too, the programme is silent about the sums involved, as well as how such a wage would be financed.

The latter factor, however, is crucial for introducing a basic income. In addition to the progressive approach, adopted by the Socialist Equality Party, which demands a basic income of €1,500 based on the taxation of the rich, there are also extremely reactionary approaches that seek to use a basic income to undermine social and welfare systems and link it to the introduction of a flat tax.

A report prepared for the Pirates by its own working group, ReSET, makes clear that the party tends towards the

latter solution. The report declares the introduction of a basic income could be used to solve the problem of financing pensions and long-term medical care.

In a television broadcast, the leading candidate of the party confirmed that the Pirates lacked “a full programme” with regard to social policy: “We speak on those issues we know something about...the sphere of the economy can undoubtedly be expanded upon.”

What is to be expected from the party’s economic policy is clear from a glimpse at the themes it “knows about”—i.e., democracy and transparency.

While the party’s posters call for “voting rights for all regardless of race and age,” its manifesto makes clear that this demand only applies to local elections. With regard to the current state election in Berlin, the Pirates support the present system, which limits participation to those with a German passport, while calling for a 3 percent hurdle instead of the 5 percent now necessary for representation in the city’s Senate.

The transparency referred to also applies to essentially unimportant meetings and decisions. Although the party demands better access to Senate documents and contracts and the opening up of meetings to the public, Baum told the *Berliner Morgenpost* that this transparency has to be limited when it is a question of business interests. When addressed about negotiations with potential investors, Baum said: “Of course, it must possible to also meet in secret.”

In the same interview, Baum described the secret contracts for the privatisation of the Berlin Water Company by the investors Veolia and RWE as an “accident”. In fact, these contracts, which guaranteed these companies billions in profits at the expense of consumers, are nothing less than scandalous and have already been challenged by the first successful referendum to be held in the city.

Based on these positions, it is also clear why the Pirates have not been specific in the Berlin election campaign on those topics that belong to their alleged expertise. There is a complete absence on their website to the youth riots in Britain, which were accompanied by unprecedented attacks on democratic rights. Nor is there any mention of the series of arson attacks in Berlin, which were used by the CDU and the Left Party to demand increased surveillance and stricter laws. The Pirate Party avoids taking a concrete position on all important issues.

In particular, the Pirates have nothing to say on the economic crisis. Even conservative commentators now admit that, based on the domination of the banks, which dictate policy to the nations of all European countries, it is no longer accurate to speak of democracy in any meaningful sense. The Senate in Berlin is the best example of the way in which a nominally leftist government implements the diktats of the banks against the population.

Talk of transparency and democracy, repeated as a mantra by the Pirates’ candidates, is totally abstract and meaningless if it does address the current political situation. Transparency in meaningless negotiations and democracy at insignificant levels of decision making will do nothing to challenge the hegemony of the banks. This is understood by the party’s runner-up on the national list, Philip Magalski, who has declared that the Pirates’ main aim was simply a new style of politics. Like the Greens, he wants to enrich the party system, he explains on his web site.

With this remark, Magalski sums up the hype surrounding the Pirates. In a situation where broad sections of the population are turning away from official politics, because they realise that all of the official parties are at the beck and call of the banks, the Pirates are seeking to renovate the facade of “democracy” and defend capitalism. With their unconventional appearance, they wish to bind the youth in particular to a social system that offers them no future and denies any chance of genuine democratic participation.

That is why the Pirate Party is being currently courted by the media. What would generally be considered as a major weakness is, for the purposes of the ruling elite, the Pirates’ main advantage: they have no programme and address none of the burning social questions. Instead, they have reduced their election campaign in Berlin to a mere public relations exercise aimed at encouraging illusions in a democracy on its death bed.

Real democracy is inextricably linked to social participation. A progressive development of society is possible when the mass of the population opposes the dictates of the banks, expropriates them and places them under democratic control. This is the perspective put forward in the current Berlin state election only by the Social Equality Party (PSG).



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