

What can be expected from the Pirate Party in Berlin?

Christoph Dreier
26 September 2011

Over the past few days, much has been said about the Pirate Party's results in recent elections for the Berlin legislature's lower chamber. Homage was paid almost unanimously to the "spirit of a whole generation" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and "a movement that was born with the Internet" (*Die Welt*). But the success of the Pirate Party is an expression of widespread political disorientation, rather than the awakening of a generation.

Post-election surveys conducted by the *ARD* television station clearly show that the Pirate Party received votes from people of almost all age groups, especially those seeking to register a protest vote against the conventional political elite. The party achieved its best result to date by winning 16 percent of voters between 18 and 35 years of age. However, a further 10 percent of 35- to 44-year-olds and 8 percent between 45 and 59 also chose the Pirates. It was only among voters over 60 years old that the party polled well below its average result, garnering only 3 percent. Occupational groups voting for the Pirates were also fairly evenly distributed.

Statistics concerning the reasons for votes cast make the situation even clearer. Some 86 percent of the Pirates' voters said the party was an alternative for those who otherwise would not have voted at all, while 59 percent said they chose the Pirates to send a warning to the other parties. The election's most critical issue was seen to be "social equality" (46 percent), followed by "education policy" (30 percent).

The figures for voters switching parties also show that the Pirates received most of the votes of people fed up with the governing parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party (27,000). The Pirates also took 17,000 votes from the Greens and 6,000 from the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

All these figures prove that the Pirates' electoral success was not based on a substantial reorientation of the younger generation, but on the dissatisfaction of all age groups with the SPD-Left Party Senate and all the established parties.

Nor do the party's core membership and leadership represent broad layers of young people. Instead, they speak

for a narrow, well-heeled clientele that has little concern for the social problems of young people, mass unemployment and low wages.

At the Pirates' last national party congress, a majority of the membership opposed adopting policies of a basic income and a minimum wage, comparing them with the "GDR setup" (i.e., the former Stalinist-ruled German Democratic Republic) and describing them as tactics of "20th century trench warfare." Sebastian Nerz, the party's national chairman at the time, had been a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) until 2004, and Bernd Schlömer, his deputy, is academic director at the federal defence ministry and an avowed supporter of former Interior Minister Gerhard Baum (FDP) and former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD).

Another prominent member of the party is Angelika Beer, the ex-Green, who served as defence spokesperson for the Green parliamentary faction involved in the preparation and execution of the illegal wars of aggression in Kosovo and Afghanistan. The Pirate Party continually declines to express official positions on these crucial issues that are of concern to millions of young people.

In their Berlin election manifesto, the Pirates called primarily for more transparency and participation in relatively insignificant political areas, while simultaneously stressing that transparency had its limits, when it came to business interests. On the other hand, they failed to address a single word to the economic crisis dominating every aspect of political life. Andreas Baum, the party's top Berlin candidate, revealed his complete ignorance about these issues threatening the very existence of millions of people, when he appeared in a small party interview hosted by the *rbb* television channel, and could estimate Berlin's €63 billion debt to be merely "many millions."

At no time did the Pirates seriously confront the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party Senate. They see themselves as part of the liberal political establishment. In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Baum made it clear that the substantive differences between the Pirates other parties were

unimportant: “What makes us different from the other parties is especially this: We are new and not exhausted.” The party stressed several times that it was ready to conduct coalition talks with any party in the lower chamber.

Simon Kowalewski, one of the new members of the Pirate Party, told the *Jetzt* youth magazine that its faction in the city legislature would ask members of other parties to help them understand the work of parliament. He said this had already worked well with Left Party deputies at the local level. Another Pirate deputy expressed gratitude to Benedict Lux of the Greens for introducing him to the functioning of parliament.

Given this mix of opportunism, naivete and ignorance about crucial issues, it is not surprising that the Pirate Party’s membership has been decreasing since the beginning of this year—just five years after it was founded.

The Swedish Pirates, who served as a model for their German sister organisation, failed miserably in Sweden’s 2010 parliamentary elections, attaining a mere 0.65 percent of the vote. Previously they had gained representation in the European Parliament, having polled 7.1 percent in the European elections of 2009. Christer Engström, their only deputy until then, consequently joined the Green faction to further her own career.

Shortly after the Berlin elections, Engstrom told the *Die Welt* daily newspaper: “We Pirates won’t be around as a political party forever. We haven’t come here to stay. We simply want to spread ideas. If the established parties—whether the Left Party or the CDU—want to take these ideas on board, all the better. Once that’s done, our job is done, too.”

The Pirates’ ability to mobilise a certain amount of protest in Berlin is the result of neither a broad base of support from young people, nor the focus of the policies they advocate. It is rather the product of an elaborate public relations campaign and extensive media hype.

Freely acknowledging their own lack of political orientation, the Berlin Pirates set up an open Internet forum, urging “voters and non-voters” to register their “favorite (political) demands” there. Aided by the web site’s advisers, visitors were able to choose from a number of demands, which were later revealed during the election campaign. Included among these were demands like “free travel on Berlin’s public transport” and “a basic income.” The Pirates presented themselves in this way as a social alternative, despite their thoroughly bourgeois character.

It was possible for such superficial trendiness and youthful appeal to achieve 9 percent of the vote, only because genuine political issues were completely excluded from the Berlin election campaigns of all the established parties. None of them used their campaigns to address the economic

crisis, the war against Libya, or widespread poverty in Berlin. While the SPD entirely avoided political statements on its placards, the Left Party’s posters covered the city with cynical lies. The Greens concentrated their campaign on the promotion of their leading candidate, Renate Künast, and the CDU put up posters with the vacuous slogan, “In order to make a change.”

The Pirate Party felt completely at home in such a climate of hollow phrase-mongering. But its campaign only really took off when the media began to turn its spotlight on the party. Hundreds of articles, as well as radio and television reports, presented the Pirates as a fresh alternative to the stuffy old establishment. In the course of this coverage, the party’s popularity ratings began to rise significantly.

The Pirates were thus specifically portrayed as the new alternative, in order to deflect widespread political discontent into innocuous pro-market economic channels.

Despite the fact that the Pirates were able to gain media support to siphon off potential protest, this party primarily embodies those middle-class layers who feel threatened by the effects of the economic crisis and are only worried about maintaining their own position at a time of sharpening class confrontation.

The Pirates in the Berlin council cannot be expected to mount the slightest degree of opposition to the city’s imminent cuts in social expenditure. Even if various petty-bourgeois groups that previously courted the Left Party now try to present the Pirates as a potentially alternative left-wing party, there can be absolutely no doubt about how this outfit will operate.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact