

Germany's Pirate Party debates new programme

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On the first weekend in December, approximately 1,200 members of Germany's Pirate Party held their ninth national congress in Offenbach. The gathering demonstrates once again that despite all the "grassroots" discussion, the Pirates do not represent an alternative to official politics, but are trying to establish themselves as a middle-of-the-road petty bourgeois party, capable of becoming a coalition partner. Indeed, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper's report on the congress asked rhetorically, "Are they the Greens mark II, or a new FDP [the pro-capitalist Free Democratic Party]?"

What distinguishes the Pirates from those older parties is not any fundamental political difference, but a certain fresh-faced appearance, and the fact that the Pirate Party still has to elaborate its party programme. It presents itself as an open and democratic organisation. At its congress, for example, every party member was entitled to submit motions and cast votes.

This meant that some motions did voice social problems effecting broad sections of the population, which in turn led to the most fierce arguments and debate. However, the actual decisions taken make clear that the Pirate Party will not contribute to a broader democratization of society and policies in the interest of the mass of working people.

This was shown in the debate on an unconditional basic income (BGE). After a lengthy discussion, the party voted by nearly 67 percent (a two-thirds vote was necessary) to include the demand for a BGE in the manifesto for the general election in 2013.

One of the main speakers supporting the BGE at the congress was Susan Wiest, a childminder from Greifswald, who in 2009 had already collected tens of thousands of signatures for this policy. She is one of the many new members of the Pirates, whose membership has doubled to nearly 19,000 since the Berlin state elections in September. Wiest speaks for a social layer of mainly young and well-educated, people who live in so-called "precarious conditions", usually finding only temporary and project-related work, or moving from one internship to the next. Many of them cannot afford an apartment, let alone start a

family. For them, an unconditional basic income is an existential question and a pre-condition for a more sustainable and socially equitable life.

The party executive reacted in the main negatively to the BGE decision and tried to placate its right-wing critics. The party's political director, Marina Weisband, said she had "been a little concerned that it was too early" for such a decision. The national chair, Sebastian Nerz, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) until 2009, drew a parallel with the FDP, whose proposal for "citizens money" offers a comparable model. The Pirates' press spokesman in the Saarland, Thomas Brück, described the BGE itself as a "distant secondary goal", and left open the question how "unconditional it would be in the end."

The congress left open the critical concrete issues regarding an unconditional basic income (how high it should be, how it would be financed, etc.). However, the Pirates did determine that a parliamentary commission of inquiry, which would do the real work of drawing up and calculating a basic income model, should decide its realisation. Such a "pirate basic income" would then not differ greatly from existing unemployment benefits and the "carrot-and-stick" approach introduced by the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party government.

Pirates' Berlin city councillor Christopher Lauer noted that the BGE was "not left-wing" and did not mean that everyone "would be kept at state expense." It should merely provide every person an opportunity to consider what he or she would do with his or her life.

The impossibility of the Pirates being able to introduce a basic income that actually enables the full participation of all in society is not only due to the limited arguments and views of the party leadership, but is associated with a basic problem. In a society in which every area of life is subordinated to the profit interests of a narrow financial elite, an appropriate basic income cannot be realised apart from a socialist perspective.

A life-sustaining basic income cannot be achieved without bringing the banks and large enterprises under the democratic control of the population and heavily taxing the massive fortunes running into the billions.

However, the Pirate Party vehemently rejects such a perspective and policy. The Pirates do not want to abolish capitalism, but merely to modernize it and make it more “transparent”. How hopeless and politically bankrupt such a policy is in the face of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s was seen in the discussion and decisions of the congress regarding the euro crisis, which also made clear that the Pirates offer no serious opposition to the dictates of the financial markets.

The congress did not reject the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in principle, but only the way the latter was intended to operate; it was not “democratically legitimate”. Several speakers stressed that they did not reject the ESM on a nationalist basis, but to achieve more democracy and transparency. They opposed the proposals by national executive member Matthias Schrader, who in advance of the congress had argued for a resolution that was clearly oriented to the FDP.

Schrader’s motion included formulations that literally came out of the open letter from Burkhard Hirsch and Frank Schäffler, two leaders of the so-called “Euro-sceptics” in the FDP. Schrader was heavily criticized by Lauer, who made it clear to business daily *Handelsblatt* that Schrader’s positions “by no means [had a] consensus on the executive”. He should have listened to the opinion of the party beforehand, Lauer said.

In the two motions on the euro crisis, Schrader spoke against “perpetual bailouts”, the purchase of government bonds by the European Central Bank and for an orderly “withdrawal of countries that do not meet the stability criteria.”

Even if the Pirates have not yet adopted an unambiguous position on the issue of the euro crisis, it is clear that the congress debate took place entirely within the framework of bourgeois politics, and revolved around the question that haunts the ruling elite: how can the burden of the crisis best be put on the shoulders of the general population? Whether through openly nationalist politics, as advocated by parts of the FDP and the right-wing Christian Social Union (CSU), or by defending the euro, as currently favoured mainly by the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party.

Both perspectives involve massive attacks on the working class, in the form of cuts in social spending and austerity measures, as all European governments are currently planning or carrying out. The Pirates did not take a stand against welfare cuts. A proposal for a cap on top salaries was rejected.

In further debates and votes, the Pirates tried to give themselves a more progressive hue. Some proposals by the party’s Berlin regional association—such as a liberal drugs policy, free use of public transport and the reform of copyright—were then included in the federal programme.

Overall, the congress presented an image that is already familiar in Berlin: a left-wing appearance, but an essentially neo-liberal core. In order that the contradictions were not expressed too openly, concrete proposals were mostly avoided and generalities prevailed.

Press reports of the congress largely reflected this. While some in the media claimed the Pirates had “turned to the left” (“Pirates on a left-liberal course”—*Hamburger Abendblatt* or “Pirate Party moves to the left”—*Focus*), there were also those who drew parallels to the free-market FDP (“Challenging the FDP”—*Stern* or “The Pirates are the new FDP”—*Augsburger Allgemeine*).

There are substantial conflicts within the Pirates, but it would be fatal to believe that these involve principled differences. Nerz, Lauer and Schrader are all loyal supporters of the German constitution and the market economy, and all are ready to assume responsibility for government. Nerz boasted in his opening speech that in FDP circles the Pirates were being called a “new liberal hope in Germany”. Lauer’s first question to the mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), when he visited the Pirates’ group in the city legislature, was why, after the failure of negotiations to form a coalition with the Greens, had Wowereit not approached the Pirates.

The pirates are a very heterogeneous party, and are trying to keep it that way as long as possible. Their heterogeneity not only lends them a certain superficial appeal, but in many ways is also their livelihood. If the Pirates set down a definitive political programme, their much-vaunted aura of otherness, so praised in the media, would be gone.

Even if their current programme attempts to provide some room for illusions, the congress has shown that the Pirates are incapable of fighting for basic democratic and social change. The increasing consolidation of the party under conditions of economic crisis and social conflict will reveal its purely bourgeois character ever more clearly.



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