

Germany: Socialist Equality Party wins support in Cologne and the Ruhr area

Our correspondents
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In recent weeks, members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG) in North Rhine-Westphalia have collected the 2,000 signatures necessary to qualify at a state level for the federal parliamentary election this autumn. PSG supporters and candidates distributed the election statement, “A socialist program against welfare cuts and unemployment in Europe”, in the Ruhr area and the city of Cologne, winning an important response from the unemployed, young people and immigrant workers.

Social inequality is very pronounced in the Ruhr and Cologne, and was the most common topic of discussion.

Nearly 5 million people live along the Ruhr River between Duisburg and Dortmund, but less than 1.5 million have proper employment involving social insurance contributions. The unemployment rate in the region was 11.3 percent in May, and in some cities it is much higher.

Even these figures, however, fail to reveal the true extent of poverty. The so-called “social equator” of the region, the A40 motorway, divides the area into “poor and less poor” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*). North, in the poorer regions of cities, you will find poverty levels of 30 to 40 percent. There are a number of streets where hardly anyone has a job.

The division of the “Ruhr area” has its roots in the long history of the region’s coal and steel industry. Almost 200 years ago coal mining commenced in the south, with miners over time tunneling underground to the north. With them went their families. During this period there were around 3,200 mines in the Ruhr. Today there are only two functioning mines, namely Prosper-Haniel (Bottrop) and Auguste Victoria (Marl).

Mines in the south of the Ruhr area were abandoned well over 100 years ago. The city of Düsseldorf and adjacent areas in the south have become residential areas for the very wealthy. The richest man in Germany, Karl

Albrecht, owner of the Aldi merchandise chain, lives here, in the city of Essen.

In the north, the remaining mines were closed down step by step in recent decades. The steel industry also experienced a decline and shed about half a million jobs between 1980 and 2002.

The northern Ruhr region has never recovered from this decline. A trip from Duisburg to Dortmund on the local train resembles passing through a war zone—decaying factories, run-down housing estates, boarded-up or broken windows, desolate stations and, above all, people who are very clearly victims of long-term poverty.

Political circles and business interests reacted to the mining crisis of 1957 by erecting the Opel plant in Bochum on the site of a disused colliery. At one point 20,000 workers were employed at the factory. Today there are around 3,000 and the plant is due for closure at the end of next year. An estimated 40,000 ancillary jobs are also at risk.

Today, coal mines and steel mills have been turned into cultural centers, and the children of former industrial workers largely earn their living in the low-paid service sector, such as the shopping centers in Essen, Oberhausen and Duisburg.

These flagship projects are often hotbeds of corruption and nepotism enabling local politicians to enrich themselves. While swimming pools, libraries, youth centers and other public facilities are closed, the city leaders—whether Social Democrat, conservative CDU or the Greens—are continually raising the salaries of the heads of communal facilities whom they depend on for support.

At job centers, supermarkets and shopping malls the PSG election team encountered widespread anger over the social decline engineered by the SPD, CDU, the Greens, the FDP and the Left Party. Men leaving the local job center were seething with anger, while a number of

women were reduced to tears by their plight.

No one here has forgotten who is responsible for the Hartz IV laws, which have led to a massive expansion of temporary low paid work—namely the SPD and the Greens. All those who spoke with PSG campaigners said there was no difference between the SPD's chancellor candidate, Peer Steinbrück, and conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Manfred Stock from Bochum survives on his small pension and fumed about the “depraved policies of all parliamentary parties.” All of them are the same: “There is not the slightest difference between Merkel and Steinbrück,” he said. The politicians have plenty of money “for underground stations, prestige airports, military drones, etc., but nothing for education and the care of the elderly, apart from Hartz IV from the Gazprom chancellor.” This last was a reference to the former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder who went on to earn millions with the Russian oil and gas company.

“I cannot believe the way the SPD now pose as supporters of the welfare state. Their own policies are based on making the working man pay,” Manfred declared. He announced his intention of reading the PSG election statement very closely. None of the parties represented in the Bundestag would get his vote, he told us.

Alfred Franke has undertaken temporary work for years. He is currently receiving the minimum wage for security personnel of €8.19 per hour. He is unmarried: “It is impossible to afford a family with such money.” All the wives of his colleagues had to work in order to survive.

He is currently working on a construction site owned by the Nestlé company. He has worked in many jobs and areas of responsibility. “The permanent colleagues have always earned more,” he says. Everyone should receive the same pay for the same work, was his modest request.

“This is also what the permanent colleagues say,” Alfred continued. He also told of the agreements struck by the unions whereby employers pay staggered surcharges, involving rates of 15 percent after six weeks on the job, and then up to 50 percent after nine months. When asked if he had ever worked long enough to receive these supplements, he responds that on most occasions his contract ran out before he could benefit.

Holger Loewink from Bochum is dependent on Hartz IV and cares for a terminally ill friend. He immediately raised the issue of poverty: “Billions are available for the banks, but nothing for the homeless, Hartz IV recipients and the unemployed.”

When we spoke to him the papers were full of reports detailing how companies like Apple pay a minimum in taxes, and the wealthy elite can avoid paying any taxes by shifting their assets into tax havens.

“The rich and corporations are always moaning about their tax burden, but in fact pay no taxes at all. In the case of ordinary workers taxes are immediately deducted from their pay,” Loewink declared. “Another law applies to the rich. They are requested to specify their income and then invariably play down their wealth. They buy property, art and anything else they can get their hands on in order to minimize their taxes. This is a glaring injustice.”

He was furious about reports in the media about the business practices of the locally based EON energy concern. “Any excessive business tax paid by a company must be repaid by the municipalities at an interest rate of 6 percent,” he pointed out. EON voluntarily paid excessive business tax to the municipalities for a few years in order to reclaim it with interest. “They stash their money with impoverished local authorities and then reclaim it, leading to the bankruptcy of cities and towns, or at least to further cuts. This cannot go on.”

Along with two thousand others, he supported the PSG election with his signature. The collection of signatures is proceeding apace even though some people are alarmed by the latest surveillance scandals and are reluctant to give the personal data needed on the signature form. They do not trust the government.

Unemployed workers at the Cologne labour exchange were also interested in finding out more about a socialist alternative. Their first question is usually: “You’re not right-wing, are you?” This is an expression of the strong opposition from broad social layers to racist organizations such as Pro Cologne and Pro NRW, active especially in Cologne against Muslims and foreigners.

There are now many Turkish-born students and workers who are entitled to vote. They were affected by the recent development in Turkey and strongly sympathized with the protests against the Erdogan government. They also gave their signatures following a discussion on the international perspective of the PSG.



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