

Strong support for PSG election campaign in German state of Hesse

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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit of Germany (Socialist Equality Party—PSG) will soon complete its campaign to collect signatures on nominating petitions to place its candidates on the ballot for the September 22 federal parliamentary election and concurrent Hessian state election.

Campaigning in Frankfurt, Rüsselsheim, Offenbach and other towns, PSG supporters have collected far more than the 2,000 signatures necessary for the federal ballot. The PSG is running candidates in both the federal and state elections to bring the socialist programme of the Fourth International to broader sections of workers and youth.

The election will take place in the midst of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s. Campaigning in the south Hessian Rhine-Main region, which is often hailed as a “booming business location” due to its comparatively high official employment figures, PSG campaigners made contact with many people affected by poverty, unemployment and brutal exploitation.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, social polarisation has become ever more acute. Approximately 1,400 millionaires inhabit the state of Hesse, while more than 400,000 people are dependent on meagre Hartz IV social benefits. Plant closures, layoffs and wage cuts have been imposed at GM-Opel, Lufthansa, Manroland, Neckermann, Schlecker, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* press agency and many other companies.

Austerity measures are being implemented in every town and city, regardless of whether they are administered by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or the Greens. PSG campaigners met very few people willing to support the SPD’s leading candidate in the state election, Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel. The SPD is generally regarded as just as right-wing and pro-capitalist as the CDU.

The CDU has governed in Hesse since its return to office in 2009. In the last state election, the SPD took barely 24 percent of the vote, its worst election result ever. This was preceded by SPD leader Andrea Ypsilanti’s attempt to form an administration with the support of the Left Party, which failed due to opposition from the right wing of her own party.

Peer Steinbrück, the SPD’s candidate for chancellor at the federal level, is even more unpopular than Schäfer-Gümbel. Daniel T., who signed in support of the PSG in Offenbach, said he had “nothing but contempt” for Steinbrück.

“I can’t trust a man who draws 80 percent of his income from the fees he charges the business community, banks and consulting firms for his services”, said Daniel. “Peer Steinbrück is a puppet of these financial bodies and a capitalist himself. As far as I’m concerned,

he’s even worse than (former SPD Chancellor Gerhard) Schröder.”

Daniel said the administration in Hesse showed how the state was systematically winding down cultural and educational services. “But the state should be creating conditions whereby people can develop into responsible citizens,” he said, “and not be dependent on financial support.”

He added that the problems had started with Schröder’s Agenda 2010. He declared, “Agenda 2010! That was about beefing up the entrepreneurs, expropriating workers, weakening trade unions, introducing systematic contract and temporary work, Americanising the labour market—and all under the guise of social democracy.”

Again and again, PSG campaigners came into contact with workers and young people who were disgruntled over all the political parties. The polarisation of German society since the 2008 crisis has burst many of their illusions, especially illusions in the parties of the so-called “left”. The SPD, Greens, trade unions and Left Party have played an active role in undermining employment conditions.

Decently paid, secure jobs are disappearing, while precarious, temporary and contract employment is becoming the norm. Workers employed at temporary, job placement or subcontracted positions are particularly brutally exploited. They are the first to suffer the effects of companies’ cost-cutting and restructuring measures, and the first to lose their jobs. The trade unions are indifferent to their fate. These are the conditions about which workers and youth spoke to the PSG campaigners.

“They’re turning the thumb screws on us”, said Hassan, who works at a delivery firm that does business with Fraport and Lufthansa. The young man, whom the PSG team met at the Frankfurt labour exchange, has been forced to take on a side job waiting tables at the European Central Bank to make ends meet.

He is afraid he will lose his main job because of cost-cutting measures that are being implemented at Frankfurt Airport. “Twelve from a staff of eighty have been sacked”, said Hassan. His workmates felt they had been completely abandoned. “So far,” he said, “Verdi [the service sector trade union] has done absolutely nothing to help us. The union doesn’t care about workers employed by supply agencies or service partners.”

Frank, a professional driver, described the pressure being shouldered by many workers at small businesses. He drives a large truck but has not received any money from his boss for three months.

“How are you supposed to pay for rent and everything else?” Frank asked. “The average guy doesn’t have reserves in his bank account to survive for three months. Our firm is a small business that transports for large companies. We’re at the bottom of the business chain; the crisis hits us first.”

He continued: “We’re virtually always working under stress to meet deadlines. A truck driver has to constantly decide whether to comply with legal speed limits or ignore them in order to be on time with deliveries. But anyone who doesn’t meet the deadlines soon gets a warning from the boss or a sacking. We used to be the kings of the road; it was a decent, respectable job. Today, you feel like a jerk doing the job.”

Frank thought building an international party was an excellent idea, although he said it would probably not be easy. He signed to support the candidacy of the PSG and wished the party success.

Many young people, in particular, signed the nominating petitions. More than 17 percent of the 15-to-25 year-olds in Hesse are officially unemployed. Many young people have to struggle to obtain vocational training, a job and a future.

Ali from Morocco was met at the Frankfurt labour exchange. He said he thought today’s parties were pathetic. “I reckon the CDU and SPD are both the same,” he said, and continued, “It’s incredible what disasters these politicians are causing in Greece, Spain and Italy.”

Ali worked for five years as a chef, a pizza maker and at a warehouse—“anywhere I could find anything”—so that he would now be able to get training and learn German. He agreed with the aims of the PSG. “The Arab Spring showed that people are ready to stand up for their rights,” he said.

Many people expressed interest in a new political perspective. The PSG campaigners noted that many workers rejected the Left Party as a political alternative because of its record over recent years. The Left Party has had seats in the Hessian state parliament and several local councils since 2008. Questioned about what they thought of this party, several workers responded: “I don’t believe the Left Party can be taken seriously as a left-wing alternative.”

The Verdi trade union and the Left Party played a particularly pernicious role in the privatisation of the municipal hospital in Offenbach. The town council recently sold the clinic to a private hospital group for a symbolic one euro, while public coffers continue to be burdened by a mountain of debt.

Arguing that the hospital could “operate profitably in public hands”, Verdi and the Left Party had backed a cost-cutting and restructuring strategy. Numerous jobs were slashed, services cut or outsourced, and pressure on the workforce increased. This was, in fact, how the hospital was prepared for privatisation.

Sana Clinics PLC, the new owner based in Munich, invited the hospital’s 2,300-strong workforce to a staff meeting on July 1. Company CEO Michael Philippi had already announced that Sana would be handling “significantly more regional patients” in Offenbach with reduced staff numbers. Now the Sana executive board is painting a rosy picture of the hospital’s future, but saying nothing about where the firm will apply the cuts.

After the meeting, this issue continued to concern the employees, many of whom were willing to support the PSG by signing petitions. Two nurses working in intensive care reported that there was no longer any scope for cuts in nursing. “We’re already working at the limit of our abilities,” one of the nurses said. “Often enough, there’s only one nurse on duty at night, and less than one is zero.”

Five years ago, in the intensive care ward, they looked after fifteen beds with the same number of staff; today they have to manage twenty.

Olga, a nurse in the neurology ward, said of the privatisation: “It’s all decided over our heads. The people working in the hospital are never asked their opinions about the running of the place.” She said

that over the three years she had been employed there she had seen increasing numbers of temporary staff.

She said fewer and fewer permanent employees were working in the wards. “But, of course, the work still has to be done, even though with fewer people”, Olga said. “We’ve now gotten used to working with assistants who are repeatedly replaced.”

The hospital is not the only public enterprise being sold off by the town. For decades, public facilities have been privatised or closed in order to lower Offenbach’s municipal debt, a town that has been governed by the SPD almost continuously since World War II. The swimming pool, a local theatre and libraries have been shut.

Transactions involving billions of euros are carried out every day a few kilometres away at the Frankfurt Stock Exchange. A tiny fraction of this would be enough to restore and sustain public facilities like the hospital. While the rich are being granted low taxes, politicians are oppressing the population with the so-called debt brake, which has been enshrined in the federal constitution.

Several people in Offenbach told PSG campaigners that everything is being subordinated to profit. Not a single person defended the privatisation of public assets. Many were alarmed at the decline of the town, which is today considered the poor house of Hesse. Some 11 percent are officially unemployed here, with a further 14.5 percent underemployed.

Sven was outraged by the sale of the hospital and looking for a way to fight against it. He gave his signature in support of the PSG candidacy without hesitation.

He said he had “sunk from a relatively affluent citizen to a poor Hartz IV recipient”. He was well educated, had a high school leaving certificate and was qualified as an insurance salesman. “That’s exactly why I have no chance of getting a job,” he said. “They would have to pay me tariff wages. They would rather take on untrained people from the street.”

Sven added it is particularly hard when he wants to give his two children presents at Christmas or on their birthdays. “That’s really difficult for me,” he said. He used to support the Greens, but says that the established parties are today interested only in improving things for themselves. “They even treat our health as a saleable commodity,” he said.



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