

German pseudo-left think tank asserts “no alternative” to capitalism

Marianne Arens, Peter Schwarz
27 August 2013

“A cataclysm that seems imminent but fails to eventuate” was the topic of a panel discussion organised by the Institute for Modern Era Solidarity (ISM) to open its “Summer Factory 2013” at the University of Frankfurt on August 16.

The institute is run by representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens, as well as trade unionists and academics. It describes itself as “a programmatic workshop for new left-wing political ideas” developed “across party lines”. It aims at a joint government of the SPD, Greens and Left Party.

The ISM was founded in 2010, following SPD politician Andrea Ypsilanti’s failed 2008 attempt in the state of Hesse to form an SPD-Green minority government supported by the Left Party. Alongside Ypsilanti on the ISM’s executive board sit Attac founder and Green Party politician Sven Giegold, Left Party chairperson Katja Kipping, Left Party economist Axel Troost, and several federal parliamentary deputies from the SDP, the Greens and the Left Party.

The panel discussion in Frankfurt underscored the reactionary perspective lurking behind the SPD-Green-Left Party project of the ISM. The panelists tried to outbid each other in professing “the absence of alternatives” to the existing social order and expressing their respect for Chancellor Angela Merkel. As far as the working class was concerned, however, they showed only contempt and hostility.

The well-heeled politicians, union officials and academics who came together in the Institute for Modern Era Solidarity are obviously alarmed about mounting social tensions. Fearing that violent class struggles will threaten their privileged positions, they draw ever closer to the ruling class. They berate workers and young people—those no longer prepared to support their policies in the wake of the SPD-Green Party’s anti-social Agenda 2010 programme and the austerity measures enforced by the SPD-Left Party administration in the Berlin Senate—for being passive and backward.

This theme recurred time and time again in the contributions from the podium at the Frankfurt event. The

attack was launched by Dr. Sonja Buckel from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, where Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno developed the theories of the Frankfurt School in the last century. She opened the meeting by thanking the sponsors, which included the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, the Greens in the European Parliament, the SPD’s Left Democratic Forum 21, the Left Party, and the *Neues Deutschland*, *taz* and *Freitag* newspapers.

Buckel recalled the abortive attempt by Andrea Ypsilanti to form an SPD-Green Party minority government, with the support of the Left Party. She said this had failed due to snipers from the ranks of the SPD. She lamented that the political establishment was still dominated by a masculine spirit and spurned progressive developments. No major social transformation was occurring because there was no genuine alternative to the kind of politics we see today. In the “era of post-democracy”, the balance of social forces had dramatically deteriorated since the upheavals of 1968, she said. A “left-wing reform project” would have absolutely no chance.

Tom Strohschneider, chief editor of *Neues Deutschland*, believed the problem was that “the average worker has dropped out of the picture”. The unemployed and Hartz IV recipients were no longer accessible: “They just don’t read”. The question for Strohschneider is, “How do we win these people back, without looking them in the eye and saying we’ve got the answers—because we don’t want to do that”.

Retired Verdi trade union executive member Dr. Franziska Wiethold complained that the “ambivalence in everyday life”, which could have possibly countered neo-liberalism, had completely disappeared since the crisis of 2008. “Times of crisis are never times of dramatic change”, she said, stressing that “Those are never times when the masses break through the system”.

According to Wiethold, it was once correctly predicted that revolution occurs “when the rulers can no longer manage affairs”. But the former Socialist German Student League activist then added: “Mrs. Merkel can. And we’ve

got to realise that”.

The long-standing Verdi functionary said the Merkel government was capable of dispelling conflicts and protests, unabashedly claiming she could primarily thank the unions for that. The unions had feared that workers’ participation in management and collective agreements would be abolished under the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-Christian Social Union (CSU)-Free Democratic Party (FDP) government, but the opposite had occurred. “That might all be regarded as corporatism”, but one should “not underestimate the importance of taking small steps”.

It is true, the Merkel government really does owe a lot to the unions. They covered for her when she enforced brutal austerity programmes on Greece and other European countries, and paved the way for low wages, layoffs and an expansion of the low-wage sector in Germany. As Wiethold confirmed in Frankfurt, the unions have benefited greatly from the advent of the Merkel government. They are taken seriously and have experienced a certain boom: “We’re something to reckon with again”.

Benjamin Mikfeld, former national chairman of the Young Socialists and head of an SPD think tank called the Democracy Brain Trust, said the “neoliberal rollback” feared by the “left” after Merkel’s assumption of power had happened only to a limited extent. The “left wing” had actually been able to advance its agenda, he claimed, in particular with regard to gay marriage and the minimum wage debate. It was only in the field of economics that the right wing held sway, and that was because the left had no answer to the economic crisis, he concluded.

“Why hasn’t the crisis led to a turning point?” asked Mikfeld. His answer was that the CDU had very adeptly collaborated with the IG Metall union, whose ideas significantly shaped the government’s crisis management. “We underestimated the conservatives’ flexibility”, he urged. Merkel had managed to “distract attention from the system question [i.e. capitalism]”. He claimed that a survey by the IG Metall union had shown that most workers today wanted “no change”.

Alex Demirovic, an executive board member of the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, summed up the attitude of all the panelists when he said German society was in a “vegetative state” and “completely anaesthetised.” One had to start again from scratch.

The anti-Marxist and anti-labour orientation of the ISM had already been revealed in its founding manifesto. This decidedly distanced itself from the “guiding political principles, governing the thoughts and actions of ‘customary’ left-wing organisations: equality and justice, solidarity and democracy”.

According to the founding proclamation, “A significant

failure of the political left” had been “to identify capitalism as a system of exploitation of the vast majority by a privileged minority, while neglecting to simultaneously focus criticism on other social structures of domination such as patriarchy, the system responsible for the oppression of women”.

This program focuses on issues of gender and identity politics in order to mobilise affluent sections of the middle class in opposition to the social demands of the working class.

Where this leads is shown by events in Egypt. Adherents of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, who had been largely sympathetic to the revolutionary uprising against Mubarak two years ago, now fully support the military’s counter-revolution. Hasim al-Beblawi, the prime minister appointed by the military, is even a member of an Egyptian party affiliated to the SPD.

Friedrich Engels once wrote about the deputies of the St. Paul’s Church, the first all German parliament in 1848: “From its very first meeting, this assembly of old women was more frightened about the least stirrings of a popular movement than all the reactionary plots of all the German provincial governments put together”.

This description is equally applicable to the representatives of the ISM. Their whining about a political “absence of alternatives” and kowtowing to Merkel is not the product of the demoralisation of otherwise well-meaning “left-wingers”. Their behaviour reflects the reaction of wealthy members of the middle classes to increasing social polarisation. The SPD, Greens and Left Party are equally determined to oppose and suppress any social movement from below.



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