Germany: PSG election campaign in Frankfurt

Our correspondents
31 August 2013

Last Saturday, the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG) campaigned in the Frankfurt district of Gallus for the federal and local elections. Gallus is a traditional working class area, inhabited mainly by low-income and immigrant workers.

Although Frankfurt am Main is the economic and financial centre of the state of Hesse, unemployment in the city, at 7.5 percent, is higher than the state average of 5.9 percent. The social contradictions are particularly stark in the banking centre. In contrast to the glittering riches behind the facades of the financial palaces, there are tens of thousands of people struggling to survive in low-paying jobs and insecure employment.

Two major problems in the city are particularly evident in Gallus: high rents and property speculation. The city is allowing private firms to build so-called high-value apartments on five large plots of land, which no one living in the area can afford. Even Frankfurt's apartment construction company (FAAG), which in run by the city, is attempting to seek high profits from expensive apartments, whereas its collective predecessor had created social housing.

The tense social conditions were expressed in several discussions at the PSG's stand. Mrs. K, who lives on a nearby estate owned by the FAAG, said of the impact of the new luxury buildings, "Previously the rents on our street were increased every three years. But since 2011 this is happening every year." Many who rent properties, including her, had either to seek a good lawyer or move out.

Mrs. K was interested in the PSG's demand that apartments should be transferred into public property. The PSG insists that a decent, affordable home is a basic social right, and its program plans to nationalise the large property and construction firms without compensation, and place them under the democratic control of workers and tenants.

Yvonne, a primary school teacher and mother of five children, no longer trusts the traditional parties. Although the development of children is a public concern, and many teachers, students and pensioners volunteer to help, the political parties have no interest in creating the preconditions for a good upbringing and education, she said.

"The means employed by the state in the form of money and qualified personnel are insufficient to give the children a fair chance," Yvonne said. "Children from low-income families with a German or immigrant background are especially neglected."

As a teacher she sees daily that the integration and equal treatment of pupils has been abandoned. Primary school plays an important role in the development of a child, she continued, but integration and equality had not worked in practice in any of the four schools in which she has taught.

"The CDU (Christian Democratic Union)-led state government boasts that there are no "lost hours" in schools and that there is a "teaching guarantee." In reality, if a teacher is absent, an under-qualified and unprepared person is sent who basically supervises the children. Put simply, no teachers are taken on, and the burden on existing teachers is very high. At primary school a teacher teaches a class of 22 pupils, so it is very difficult to give sufficient time to the children," she explained.

In fact, conditions are deteriorating. The city's CDU/Green Party governing coalition laid out a massive austerity program at the beginning of the year, which will make numerous public institutions and social services more expensive. To cite only a few examples, entry to swimming pools, museums and the city's botanic gardens will be increased, while charges for nursery will rise and funding for materials for schools and nurseries will be cut. The property tax will rise, which will mainly affect those renting their accommodation, while the business tax, which falls above all on the banks that earn multi-million profits, and on large concerns, is to remain unchanged.

The main criticism of the cuts from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Frankfurt is that they do not save enough money. The Left Party supports the SPD and is striving to build a joint coalition together with them and the Greens.

"There is no party in the national parliament (Bundestag) or in the Hessen state parliament which represents the working class," PSG candidate Helmut Arens said at the

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stand. “It makes no difference if the CDU or SPD win the election. In effect we have a grand coalition of the bourgeois parties, stretching from the CDU to the Left Party. That is the reason why the PSG is participating in the elections: it is the only party giving the workers a voice.”

The parties are raising none of the burning issues in the campaign because they are united on all fundamental issues: the unresolved euro crisis, the threat of war against Syria, the NSA spying affair and the constant attacks on wages and jobs. Many who participated in discussions confirmed this. The election campaign was completely apolitical, they said, and there was nothing to be seen apart from colourful placards.

Mrs. D, a housewife who stopped at the information stand on her bicycle, shared this sentiment. She couldn’t identify any real debate between any of the established parties. In the past the SPD at least still verbally defended the interests of the working population, she said, “But now they have totally forgotten about their traditional voters. I don’t believe the hollow promises of these parties any more.”

Mrs. D. said she doesn’t bother voting any more, but she was willing to take a copy of the PSG’s program. She thought the demand for the international unity of the working class was correct and necessary.

She explained that her father, who is now dead, was a member of the SS. She had suffered a lot as a result, even though she had nothing to do with his actions. She thought that the state was still influenced by an extreme right-wing ideology. There was no other explanation for how the right-wing terrorist organisation NSU could remain undetected for years. She didn’t believe that the current trial against a member and some supporters of the terrorist group would bring clarity. “The people who were at fault for these murders have not really been held responsible,” she said.

Noura, a radiology assistant from Sudan, also did not think much of elections. “After the election, no one will concern themselves with what they promised before anyway,” commented the young woman, who had just finished a night shift. She said that the working conditions in her department were very reasonable, but that among care workers there was a lot of dissatisfaction due to personnel shortages. Noura thought it was good that the PSG opposed the privatisation of hospitals, as in the case of the clinic in the town of Offenbach.

A Polish worker was attracted above all by the party’s internationalism. An international party was necessary, he explained, “Because workers everywhere have the same problems.” The worker knew from his own experience that many migrant workers from Poland, Romania and Bulgaria were working on large building sites under conditions of slave labour.

Workers from Eastern Europe are increasingly being encouraged to come to Germany with promises of employment, but end up working on large building sites for sub-sub-sub-contractors while the trade unions and authorities look on. The principled stance of the PSG that every worker should have the right to live and work in the country of his or her choice was very appealing to him.

The PSG fights for a unified mobilisation of all European workers and for a socialist programme, as the PSG members at the table explained. Only in this way could the division of the working class and the promotion of anti-immigrant chauvinism against workers from Eastern Europe be prevented.

Johanna, a 90-year-old who was still sprightly in spite of her age, agreed with this. She felt it was entirely possible that the current crisis could lead to a new catastrophe and fascism.

Johanna still remembered well how the Nazis had terrorised Leipzig when she was 10 years old. She described how she had accompanied her father, who was in the SPD, in campaigns against the Nazis. One slogan still remains in her memory today: “Fear the brown hordes, who murder men, women and children.”

Johanna’s main concern currently is high unemployment. “Work is a basic requirement for the people,” she said. She did not think that any of the established parties—the SPD, CDU or Greens—would create any jobs. She had worked hard throughout her life and receives a relatively good pension, but she was very concerned that her daughter, who is in her mid-40s, has been unemployed for years. Johanna has to support her daughter and grandchild from her pension. “What you said sounds good, and I wish you success in your election campaign!” she commented.

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