

# European election: SEP (Germany) collects signatures in Leipzig and Halle

Our correspondents  
27 January 2014

A team in the Leipzig-Halle region (an industrial centre in the former East Germany) collecting voter signatures to enable the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) to run in the upcoming European elections met with wide support.

Despite icy cold temperatures, hundreds of signatures were collected last week outside job centres, libraries and factories. This is not surprising, since the program of the SEP coincides with the experiences of workers and young people in the region. Moreover, it offers a perspective for the future informed by the lessons of their bitter experiences over the past 25 years of German reunification.

Campaigning outside a massive BMW plant and Amazon logistics centre—both infamous for their widespread use of low-wage agency workers—the SEP teams won support when they explained that it was necessary to build a new working class party. Those who spoke to the SEP said that none of the established political parties represented them. Most dismissed the Left Party and the trade unions, saying they would never represent their interests.

Both workers at the job centre and employed workers found the SEP's call for the unification of the working class across Europe and worldwide very persuasive.

Of all German cities, Leipzig is second only to Dortmund when it comes to the rate of unemployment. Between 2005 and 2011, Leipzig was considered the poverty capital of Germany, hitting a high point in 2009 of 27.2 percent of residents living below the poverty line. Leipzig remains in first place, however, when it comes to child poverty (29.9 percent).

Unemployment in Leipzig in 2013 was about 10.3 percent. Despite a modest decline in unemployment, the poverty rate has hardly fallen. This is because most

of the new jobs pay poverty wages.

The exploitation of temporary workers at Amazon provoked nationwide headlines. What is less well known is the equally dramatic situation in the auto industry in Leipzig.

At the BMW plant, opened in 2005 with massive subsidies from the city, only 3,700 of the 6,000 workers are employed directly by the company. Precise figures are difficult to come by; however, a rough picture can be obtained from reports in the press and the very sparse information provided by the IG Metall trade union.

The space occupied by the BMW plant also houses 22 other firms, with additional workers employed on the premises by external companies. At the factory gate, one sees a plethora of company emblems on the uniforms of those passing by. Many of the company's partners, such as Thyssen-Krupp, themselves employ agency workers. As a result, the workers are divided into a multiplicity of differently paid groups: the core workforce, temporary workers, those working for BMW partners and suppliers, and agency workers.

Vacancies in the auto industry in Leipzig are advertised only through agencies. Porsche and BMW have outsourced their recruitment. Those who are hired by agencies generally get only a temporary contract. The wage difference between the core workforce and those on “irregular” contracts is at least 20-25 percent.

The imposition of such conditions would not have been possible without the collaboration of the unions. In the contract bargaining round in September of 2013, the IG Metall agreed to an hourly pay rate of €7.86 for the lowest-paid occupational group in eastern Germany. The proposed national minimum wage of €8.50 comes into force under this contract only in January of 2016.

The contract approved by the union in 2012 for the

metal working industries has proven to be an effective means of placing workers under murderous pressure. In addition to a staggered industry pay award, permanent employment is supposed to be offered after two years. In practice, this means a two-year probation, with productivity targets rising continuously.

At the end of this period, BMW keeps those who have endured. But how long can someone hold out before his health is ruined by the three-shift system and 76-second pace of the production line?

This is the reality behind “Europe’s most modern auto factory,” praised in glowing terms by the business press. In this respect, the BMW plant resembles Leipzig’s city centre: behind the glittering facade lies a return to early capitalist conditions of exploitation.

Against this background, the SEP team in Leipzig held many discussions regarding the role of Stalinism and the Left Party, which are politically responsible for the present day situation.

Leipzig was the city where the “Monday demonstrations” against the Stalinist regime in East Germany had their origin in 1989. At that time, thousands took to the streets to demand justice, democracy and freedom of expression.

However, the Stalinist rulers, in collaboration with the West German government of Helmut Kohl, reintroduced capitalism into the east. The social gains that had existed in East Germany were destroyed. Those in the Stalinist ruling circles sought new careers in a reunified, capitalist Germany, and threw the workers to the wolves.

This too is very tangible in Leipzig. Following reunification, the numbers employed in the metal working industries fell from 100,000 to just 11,000 by the mid-1990s. Heavy engineering, plant construction and machine tool engineering were destroyed.

The generation of workers who at the time were in the middle of their working lives were thrown onto the street. Younger people moved away in search of jobs.

Outside the job centres SEP campaigners collecting signatures heard the same terrible reports from people who had lost the means to survive, or who saw no chance of a tolerable life. The consequences for themselves, their children, partners and families are often devastating.

On the basis of this social desolation, hyper-modern businesses have arisen that in no way compensate for

the loss of jobs (the metal-working sector today employs some 18,000). The so-called “boom” in the region is based on the ability of companies to find workers who are forced, due to the betrayals of Stalinism, to labor under the most miserable conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**