

# Socialist Equality Party European election campaign finds support in German state of North Rhine-Westphalia

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The European election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) has met with significant support in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state (with a population of 18 million). In recent weeks, some 900 registered voters have given their signatures to help get the PSG on the ballot.

PSG members and supporters collected signatures in Bielefeld, Cologne, Dortmund, Gelsenkirchen, Essen, Bochum, Oberhausen and Duisburg and discussed the joint election statement of the PSG and Britain's Socialist Equality Party.

As the statement explains, the European Trotskyists are pursuing “the goal of uniting working people across Europe in the struggle for a socialist society, which is based upon the principle of social equality, instead of the enrichment of the few at the expense of the vast majority”.

Numerous discussions at job centres, in city centres and neighborhoods focused on the harsh austerity measures being imposed by the European Union (EU) and the Merkel German government, as well as the revival of German militarism. Many of those who supported the PSG campaign with their signatures were affected by unemployment, underemployment, low wages or poverty, or more than one of these conditions.

At the Duisburg job centre early last week, for example, the tense social conditions and the anger, and in some cases desperation, of those affected were obvious. Before the centre opened at 8 am, many people were already lined up in front of the locked doors in an effort to make it on time to their appointments.

Under the reactionary Hartz “reforms”, turning up late or missing an appointment can be punished with sanctions, meaning the reduction or end of welfare

support. Arriving on time, however, does not necessarily mean that the queue moves quickly. In the job centre, there are further lines, so the entire visit can last two hours.

Some workers rushed off, only to come back soon after, because job centre employees had requested further documentation before they would consider applications for financial aid, let alone approve it.

Many of the unemployed we spoke to complained about the stalling tactics and dirty tricks. Many had not received any money for weeks, although they had provided all the necessary documents. Some of those affected were women or entire families who did not know how they were to feed their children or buy necessary hygienic items like nappies. One man told us he had not been able to purchase essential medication because he had no money. As a result, his health had worsened.

Some of those who'd come to the centre had a job, but the pay or the hours were not enough to make ends meet. A woman explained that she had only had a 20-hour a week contract for years, despite wanting to work full-time. Since the pay was not enough to live on, she had to top it up with Hartz IV welfare benefits. To obtain the benefits, she has to come to the job centre every month with her job contract and other documents. A few years ago, workers were only required to bring these documents once a year.

An older worker gave his signature to the PSG campaign and urged his son and his friend also to sign, because it was time “to do something against those at the top”. He explained he was jobless because the TSTG tire plant in Duisburg had closed at the end of last year.

TSTG was originally owned by ThyssenKrupp, but was sold to Voestalpine, the Austrian steel company, several years ago, which subsequently shut the firm down. The

TSTG works council and IG Metall trade union organised several fruitless appeals to the politicians to block the closure, but refused to organise any serious measures to fight it or to appeal to ThyssenKrupp steel workers in the area, who were also being hit by cost-cutting and the slashing of jobs.

The former TSTG worker reported that he had been given access to social benefits for only nine months. Now he had to fight with the employment agency PEAG and the job centre, even though he has worked his whole life and had never been unemployed before.

The shutdown of Krupp in Duisburg-Rheinhausen and numerous other businesses in the Ruhr area has contributed significantly to the high unemployment and widespread poverty in the region.

The jobless rate in Dortmund and Duisburg at the end of 2013 stood at 12.5 percent, in Essen and Oberhausen at 12.1 percent and in Gelsenkirchen at 15 percent.

According to a study by the University of Duisburg-Essen, published at the end of January, approximately two-thirds of the unemployed are dependent on Hartz IV welfare. Only one-third of those unemployed still receive regular jobless benefits.

Since 2005, the percentage of Hartz IV claimants among the unemployed across the country has increased from 57 to 67 percent. In North Rhine-Westphalia, such claimants account for 73 percent, and in six municipalities, over 80 percent: Oberhausen (84.2 percent), Gelsenkirchen (83.7 percent), Essen (82.1 percent), Dortmund (81.8 percent), Herne (80.4 percent) and Duisburg (80.3 percent).

“It has become an exception to be covered by jobless benefits, even though it’s a social security benefit for which contributions have been paid”, said sociologist Gerhard Becker, explaining the study’s results. Instead, it has become the norm for the unemployed to receive the jobless benefit II or “Hartz IV”, a type of welfare that is means-tested and supervised by the job centre.

The Ruhr region is one of the hardest hit in Germany in terms of poverty and unemployment. As a study by Creditreform last month revealed, Duisburg came in first place ahead of Dortmund, Berlin, Leipzig, Essen and Bremen for personal bankruptcies among cities with a population of more than 400,000. At the beginning of the year, 62,630 people, that is 15.4 percent of Duisburg’s population, were personally bankrupt. In some districts of the city, every third or fourth person is bankrupt.

In addition, conditions at job centres in Duisburg have deteriorated, due to the Social Democratic-Left Party-

Green Party’s city administration’s budget policies. For months, more than 10 percent of the 740 full-time jobs at the city’s seven job centres have gone unfilled. The consequences? Reduced hours, from 8 am to 11 am instead of 8 am to 12 pm since December, piles of unprocessed applications and outstanding payments to many Hartz IV claimants, as many of those affected told us outside the job centres.

On December 9, job centre workers demonstrated at the city hall during their lunch break against the intolerable conditions. Many workers in the job centres also only have temporary contracts. Additionally, there are the frustrations of the job. The mountain of files from unemployed city residents, who are waiting on benefits for rent, heating and transportation, grows bigger every day.

Last week it was announced that the city intends to hire 32 full-time employees at the job centres and 25 trainees. This will fill less than half the unoccupied positions. In addition, they are to receive only two-year temporary positions.

Since the city administration of the Social Democrats, Left Party and Greens has decided to cut 640 administrative jobs by 2021, the additional jobs at the job centres will have to be cut from other areas. This will affect welfare associations and initiatives that operate with the assistance of jobs paying €2 per hour.

As a result, many welfare associations recently received written notification that the job centres would cut a large number of the €2 [US\$ 2.70] jobs in the city. Rolf Karling, of the “citizens for citizens” association, from Duisburg Rheinhausen explained, “15 workers were cut from my association without any replacement. All of them are over 50 years of age and due to illnesses they are no longer suitable for the labour market”.

*The author also recommends:*

The Socialist Equality Party candidates for the European election  
[16 January 2014]



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