Twenty-five years since the reunification of Germany

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On October 3, 1990 the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, known as the GDR), a state with 17 million inhabitants, was disbanded 41 years after its founding and incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany.

In both East and West Germany, only a few of those affected were aware of the consequences of this step. There was no public debate and no referendum. Instead, there was a propaganda campaign by every political party and the media, which proclaimed that the liquidation of the GDR, the privatization of nationalized property and the introduction of capitalism were synonymous with freedom, democracy, prosperity and peace. Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) spoke at mass rallies in the GDR and promised to transform the region into "flourishing landscapes where it pays to live and work."

The GDR state party, the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED), supported this campaign as well. "In my opinion, the path to unity was unavoidable and had to be followed with determination," wrote the last SED prime minister, Hans Modrow, in his memoirs.

Gregor Gysi, who took over the chairmanship of the SED in late 1989 and is still playing a leading role in the Left Party, said this week in an interview that he had undertaken the task of leading "the eastern elites—including middle ranking functionaries—into the united Germany."

Gysi has aptly summed up the role of the SED. Far from representing the interests of working people, the party spoke for the "Eastern elites," the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy, which regarded nationalized property primarily as the source of its own privileges. Facing mass protests, the bureaucracy concluded that its privileges could be defended better on the basis of capitalist property and under the protection of the West German state than by maintaining the GDR.

For the working class, the consequences of capitalist restoration were disastrous. Already prior to October 3, western corporations and banks swooped like vultures upon the GDR's nationalized property. East German industry, which played a leading role in Eastern Europe, guaranteeing full employment and social security, was razed to the ground in a brief period of time.

The Treuhand agency, established by the Modrow government to privatize the state property of the GDR, oversaw the dismantling of no less than 14,000 state owned enterprises. Some were sold, while most were mothballed. Within the space of three years, 71 percent of all employees lost their jobs. The well-developed education and social system, and the dense network of cultural institutions, were broken up as well.

The eastern part of Germany has never recovered from this devastation. Unemployment in the east, at 9.8 percent, is well above the 5.8 percent in the west. The total population in the east has declined by two million due to emigration and a declining birth rate. Many young jobseekers have quit the east, and the region now has a disproportionately elderly population.

The social devastation was not confined to the former GDR. German big business used the low wages in Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe as a lever to drive down wages in the west. Ten years after German unification, the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder introduced the Hartz laws, which created the basis for an extensive low-wage sector, currently embracing more than a quarter of all employees.

Even more devastating than the social consequences are the political results of German unification. Following the crimes committed by the Hitler regime and its defeat in the Second World War, Germany was forced to adopt a policy of military restraint. However, the unification of Germany has changed all that. The German ruling class confronts the same dilemma as it did in the early 20th century. Too big for Europe and too small for the world, Germany is seeking to dominate Europe in order to assume the role of a world player.

German imperialism is once again spouting its former arrogance and aggressiveness. It has raised its claims to be the hegemon and disciplinarian of Europe, dictated austerity programs to Greece and other countries, recalling the brutality of the Nazi occupation, and is rapidly upgrading its

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military capacities.

Two years ago, President Joachim Gauck used the Day of German Unity to issue a call for Germany to play a role in foreign and military affairs, “commensurate with the importance of our country.” His demand was rapidly taken up by the government and the media. Berlin played a leading role in the coup in Ukraine, which helped bring a pro-Western regime to power, and in the military buildup of NATO at the Russian border.

Now Germany is also preparing an intervention in Syria, where two nuclear powers, the US and Russia, are in direct military confrontation. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* insists that “Germany has fundamental interests in the Syrian conflict.” Germany cannot count on Putin or rely on its American and French allies, the paper wrote this week. “Therefore Germany itself has to become more involved.” A nuclear world war, which was always on the horizon during the Cold War but never took place, is now again a real danger.

The return of militarism has in turn stripped away the democratic facade of the Federal Republic. Even conservative jurists are forced to admit this. “A quarter of a century after reunification this constitutionally bound country faces an existential crisis, the rule of law is eroding, democracy is weakening, the system of separation of powers has further shifted in favour of the executive branch,” wrote Peter M. Huber, a judge at the Federal Constitutional Court, in a commentary for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

To counter the support and solidarity of broad layers towards war refugees from the Middle East, the ruling elites are once again erecting border fences and walls in Europe, strengthening xenophobic, right-wing tendencies. The Bavarian CSU, a member of the federal government, has gone so far as to line up with the far-right Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban.

For three days the ruling elites are celebrating German unification in Frankfurt and Berlin, with pious speeches and triumphalism. For working people, the anniversary should be an occasion to draw their own balance sheet.

Many now look back at the unification with bitterness. According to one survey, “an anti-capitalist attitude” prevails in eastern Germany today. Eight out of ten East Germans associate the market economy with exploitation, and 50 percent associate the former planned economy with security. In the west, the response would not be fundamentally different.

What is missing from popular consciousness, however, is an understanding of the causes of the end of the GDR and an alternative political perspective. In particular, the role of Stalinism is not broadly understood. Stalin emerged in the 1920s in the Soviet Union as the representative of a conservative bureaucracy, which removed and then murdered the leaders of the October Revolution. This culminated in the assassination 75 years ago of Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International.

After the Second World War, the Stalinist bureaucracy extended its control, along with the property relations created by the October Revolution, to Eastern Europe and Germany, while simultaneously suppressing the revolutionary aspirations of the working class in France, Italy and many other countries. In the GDR, Hungary and Poland, the ruling bureaucracy violently suppressed workers' uprisings. It contributed significantly to the stabilization of capitalism after the catastrophe of the Second World War.

The nationalist program of Stalinism, expressing the interests of the counter-revolutionary state apparatus, was diametrically opposed to the internationalist program of socialism advanced by the Fourth International. The globalization of production rendered the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country” increasingly untenable. The bureaucracy, led by the CPSU under Gorbachev responded, as Trotsky had predicted as long ago as 1936, with the restoration of capitalism.

In a statement on German reunification, the Socialist Workers League (BSA), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, warned in October 1990: “The international balance of forces, within which the imperialists have regulated their rule with the assistance of the Stalinists and social democrats and defended their global interests, has broken apart. The old conflicts between the imperialist powers for the re-division of the world, which have thrown humanity into the horror of world war twice this century, are re-emerging.”

This warning has now been fully confirmed. The urgent answer to war, dictatorship and social inequality is the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

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