

German Social Democratic Party in free-fall

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Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) finds itself in free fall. In the latest poll by Forsa on Wednesday, its support fell to 19 percent, a decline of 2 percent from the previous month and an historic low for the SPD.

Forsa's voter trends report for Stern/RTL states, "Only 14 percent say the SPD best represents their personal interests." Forsa head Manfred Güllner commented on the results, "The working class still makes up the majority of society but no longer feels represented by the current SPD."

The collapse of the SPD in the polls is the direct product of the right-wing, anti-social and militarist policies the party has pursued for years. The SPD is known as the "Hartz IV party," which initiated an unprecedented social decline ten years ago with the Agenda 2010. The Hartz laws of the SPD/Green Party government (1998-2005), under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and foreign minister Joschka Fischer, had catastrophic consequences.

Laid-off workers now lose all rights to social benefits after a year at the latest and are degraded to pleading for assistance. Those who wind up on Hartz IV welfare barely stand a chance of ever making it out of poverty. According to a study by the Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband, three quarters of those affected remain on Hartz IV permanently. Even the threat of falling into Hartz IV forces many laid-off workers to take a new job, often on the basis of low wages, a temporary contract or part-time hours.

Through the Agenda 2010, a second labour market was created, characterised by temporary work, short-term contracts and all kinds of low-paid jobs without any social security or rights. The legalisation of such precarious jobs has led to a sharp rise in poverty. The Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband's latest poverty report classifies 15.4 percent of the population, or 12.5 million people, as poor. Among these are around 3.4 million

pensioners and over 2.5 million children.

At the initiative of Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD), the Bundestag two weeks ago adopted new legislation to regulate temporary jobs and short-term contracts. It writes extreme conditions of exploitation into law. At the same time, in collaboration with the trade unions, all opposition is being suppressed.

The SPD's social counter-revolution has become the model for social democratic politics across Europe. The SPD led the way in enforcing one austerity programme after another on the Greek population and blackmailed and plundered the country in the interests of the international banks. Due to the collapse of the social democratic Pasok as a result of these policies, SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel and president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz (SPD) now cooperate closely with Syriza to press forward with social attacks.

The SPD has been attempting for years to export its Agenda 2010 to France. Two years ago, the architect who gave his name to the reforms, Peter Hartz, visited French President François Hollande and his government in the Elysee Palace to advise them on their labour market reforms. The result is the El-Khomri law, which the Socialist Party government has now imposed by emergency decree against mass protests.

In mid-March, at the beginning of the key phase in France's Agenda policy, leading European social democratic politicians met in Paris to strengthen the hand of President Hollande. Along with Gabriel and Schulz, Italian Prime Minister and Democratic Party (PD) chairman Matteo Renzi, the then Austrian Chancellor and SPÖ chairman Werner Faymann, Portuguese Prime Minister and chairman of the Socialist Party Antonio Costa and the vice president of the EU Commission, Federica Mogherini, all participated.

The SPD has also played a key role in the

preparations for war. Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), Germany's foreign minister, has led the shift in foreign policy and the return of German militarism. In close collaboration with defence minister Ursula Von der Leyen (CDU), he has organised military rearmament. Hundreds of millions of euros which have been squeezed out of the working class by austerity measures are flowing directly into arms programmes for the military.

These reactionary policies are coming up against growing popular opposition. The SPD virtually collapsed in March's state elections. In Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, the SPD barely surpassed 10 percent of the vote and finished behind the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Members are also rushing in large numbers to leave the SPD. Since 1990, it has lost more than half its membership.

The SPD's financial structure has in the meantime become largely independent of declining membership dues. The bureaucratic organisation works according to corporate targets and controls a wide-ranging network of commercial operations. In addition, the party receives large sums from the state party financing system. Last year, state subsidies amounted to more than €50 million. The SPD is a party of the state, which enforces the interests of German imperialism and leading corporate associations with utter disregard for the opposition of the population.

Concern is growing in the ruling elite about the party's declining influence. The latest edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*'s weekly magazine published a lead article on the subject entitled, "Decline of a people's party." It began, "The SPD has hit rock bottom."

The article continued: "The SPD is Germany's oldest party. It resisted the Nazis, provided three great Chancellors and influenced the German state like no other party apart from the CDU. But if federal elections took place on Sunday, it would receive, according to the latest polls, only 20 percent of the vote. In the east, the AfD would be 5 percentage points ahead of the SPD. A horror scenario for the great old party."

The advanced decomposition of the social democrats is an international phenomenon. In Austria, Greece, Britain and above all in France, and also in many other countries, a similar development is taking place. It is connected to a growing radicalisation of the working

class.

In Greece, mass strikes have taken place against the brutal austerity policies of the Syriza government. In France, workers and students have taken to the streets for weeks to protest against the Hollande government's social cuts and labour market reforms. In Germany, strikes and workplace protests are sharply on the rise. Last year, the official number of strike days surpassed the one million mark for the first time in many years.

In the United States, China and India, strike waves are also breaking out. In the US, over 40,000 employees of the telecommunications giant Verizon have been on strike for weeks. This growing global radicalisation of workers and youth is finding expression in the mounting opposition to the SPD.

The working class confronts the task of finally liberating itself from these reactionary, nationalist bureaucracies. However, this requires more than a rejection of the party by refusing to vote for it and abandoning membership. The danger that far right parties like the AfD and FN could exploit the political vacuum is great.

The working class must adopt a new political course; it requires a new political perspective. Not a single problem confronted by the workers throughout the world can be dealt with within the framework of the nation state or the capitalist profit system. The working class needs an internationalist, socialist programme and a revolutionary party.

Herein lies the significance of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit's (PSG) participation in the Berlin state elections in September. Unlike the Left Party, which pursues the goal of retaining the SPD in power and supporting it, we call upon everyone wishing to combat war, repression, nationalism and social inequality to energetically support the PSG's campaign. We are pursuing the aim of abolishing the capitalist system, the source of inequality, poverty and war, and developing a mass movement on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.



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