

30 years of German unity

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei

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For the vast majority of the German population there is nothing to celebrate on this day of German unity. The official German national holiday has never found a noteworthy resonance in the population, because the reunification was a reactionary event based on fraud. The Wall separated two great lies. In the East, the Stalinist bureaucrats claimed to have built socialism, and in the West, the capitalist rulers who were in personnel continuity with the Nazis, celebrated themselves as liberal and democratic.

The result of the unification could only be a huge social regression. Any confidence, however vague, disappeared soon as capitalist reality took hold in East Germany. Workers' social rights were smashed, mass layoffs were enforced, and a huge cultural decline took place throughout the country. In the reactionary climate of the reunification, the most right-wing forces were boosted.

When German political leaders are commemorating the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) 30 years ago today, the earlier promises of freedom, democracy, and prosperity, are now just pallid phrases. They are refuted daily by reality. Instead, social inequality, fascism and war are on the rise in Germany and around the world and threaten the survival of mankind.

Thirty years ago, the spokespersons of the bourgeoisie had triumphantly celebrated the end of the GDR, the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the "end of history." Socialism had failed, they rejoiced. Capitalism was tantamount to democracy and the highest cultural level human society could ever attain.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) fought for the opposite perspective at the time. It was not socialism that had failed, we explained, but Stalinism, the rule of a counter-revolutionary bureaucratic caste that persecuted and murdered Marxists, oppressed the working class and sabotaged its international struggles. Not one of the contradictions that had made the twentieth century the most violent in history had been resolved.

On the contrary, the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China was only the prelude to a new offensive against the working class and new imperialist wars for the redivision of the world. Revolutionary class struggles were inevitable. The building of a socialist party that united the international working class in the struggle against capitalism was therefore all the more urgent.

Thirty years on, there is no doubt that the ICFI and its German section, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA, now Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP), were right.

30 years of war

Just three months after German reunification in 1990, a US-led coalition, including the major European powers, invaded Iraq. Since then, Washington, supported by NATO, has been waging war without interruption. Millions have been killed, tens of millions have been forced to flee and entire societies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have been destroyed. In the meantime, the US is preparing a war against the nuclear powers China and Russia, which threatens to destroy all humanity.

In Germany, 30 years after reunification, fascists are back in parliament

and hardly a week goes by without new right-wing extremist networks becoming known inside the security agencies. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is systematically courted by the state and the establishment parties because they need it to implement their right-wing policies. Many leading members of the AfD come from the police, the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and the Secret Service.

After the AfD entered parliament three years ago, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, on German Unity Day, called for "German patriotism," demanded that "the walls of irreconcilability" be dismantled and invited AfD leaders Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland for talks at Bellevue Castle, his official residence. Finally, the continuation of the Grand Coalition between the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats turned the AfD—which had received only 12.6 percent of the votes—into the leader of the opposition in parliament. Members of all parties elected AfD representatives to head important parliamentary committees.

The grand coalition is putting into practice the radical right-wing programme of the AfD. This applies to military rearment as well as to inhumane refugee policies, which follow the motto "deter and deport," forcing refugees into concentration camp-like facilities and allowing thousands to drown in the Mediterranean.

As the BSA had warned, the German ruling class has returned to great power politics and militarism following reunification. It makes the claim (in the words of government adviser Herfried Münkler) to be the "hegemon" and "disciplinarian" of Europe, has doubled its defence budget and declared the whole world its sphere of interest. Wolfgang Schäuble, who negotiated the unification agreement, has dictated brutal austerity programmes to Greece and other European countries.

This goes hand in hand with the trivialisation of the crimes of German imperialism and the Nazis. When historian Jörg Baberowski defended Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte in 2014 in *Der Spiegel* and declared, "Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious," and the SGP criticised him for this, he was vehemently defended by politicians, the media and the management at Humboldt University.

The Bundeswehr is now deployed in twelve countries—from Afghanistan in Asia to Mali in Africa. The federal government wants to massively expand these international war missions and thus continue its old claims to world power. In the new "Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific", the Foreign Office recently declared the Pacific to be a German zone of influence. Germany, as a globally active trading nation, it wrote, should "not be satisfied with a spectator role" in military terms either.

Social counterrevolution

The social balance sheet of reunification is devastating. Instead of the promised "blossoming landscapes," workers in East Germany have experienced a historically unprecedented social decline. State enterprises were sold for a song, dismantled and East Germany transformed into a low-wage paradise for West German companies. The Treuhandanstalt wound up a total of 14,000 state-owned enterprises, selling some and closing down most. Within three years, 71 percent of all workers had changed or lost their jobs. Together with state-owned property, the social achievements based upon it were smashed apart: the right to work, to medical care, education and child care.

And as the BSA had predicted, the devastating conditions in the East were used as a crowbar to grind down social rights in the West. The Schröder-Fischer government's Agenda 2010 ensured that around 40 per cent of all workers face precarious working conditions and often do not even earn enough to meet their basic needs.

While managers are paid millions and a small minority benefits from rising share and property markets, poverty has increased dramatically throughout Germany. In one of the richest countries in the world, over 2.5 million children live in poverty. In some cities in the Ruhr area, one in four children is affected.

With the coronavirus pandemic, social counterrevolution is now taking on a new dimension. The ruling class is treating the lives of workers with the same contempt and ruthlessness as those of refugees. For profits to flow again, workers are being forced back into completely unsafe factories, offices and businesses. Schools and day care centres are being reopened without any restrictions. To justify this deadly policy, politicians and journalists employ the same biological and inhuman ideology as the Nazis.

After hundreds of billions of euros have been thrown down the throats of the corporations and financial markets, hundreds of thousands of workers are now to be thrown onto the streets. The large corporations are using the crisis to push through long-cherished plans for restructuring and mass redundancies. The already horrendous low-wage sector is being further expanded and working conditions are becoming worse and worse.

Thirty years after German reunification, however, it is not only the veil of bourgeois propaganda that has been torn apart and capitalism is showing itself in all its inhuman brutality. The conditions for toppling it are also growing.

Mass protests and strikes took place last year in many countries, paving the way for future social upheavals: From Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, France, Spain, Algeria and the UK to Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, India and Hong Kong, people took to the streets. In the USA, the first nationwide strike by autoworkers in more than forty years took place. The most outstanding feature of these struggles is their international character. They are mostly carried out by the younger generation and develop outside the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions.

The coronavirus pandemic is accelerating and intensifying these social conflicts. In Germany, too, it is boiling under the surface. Workers in the public service, education, health and transport sectors, in the car, metal and steel industries are looking for ways to escape the stranglehold of the trade unions, which suppress any struggle. The younger generation is taking to the streets to protect the environment, against neo-fascism and in opposition to war.

To unite these struggles into a mass movement against capitalism, the crucial question is an international socialist perspective, based on the lessons of the 20th century. Workers must understand why capitalism could be introduced 30 years ago without encountering major resistance and what political forces were at work.

The division of Germany

The division of Germany was based on the reactionary agreements of Yalta and Potsdam, in which the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union agreed with the Western powers to suppress the revolutionary uprisings that were developing throughout Europe and to divide the continent into zones of influence.

The Kremlin bureaucracy and the leaders of the imperialist powers feared equally that after the Second World War, as had happened at the end of the First, revolutionary uprisings against capitalism would break out. Many workers were armed in Italy, France, Yugoslavia and Greece. They had fought in the resistance against fascism. In Germany too, factory occupations and spontaneous expropriations took place everywhere.

The Kremlin bureaucracy pledged to use its influence over the

Communist parties in Western Europe and Greece to demobilise the armed masses and ensure a capitalist development. In return, it was assured of buffer states in Eastern Europe to give protection against another imperialist invasion.

To this end, every revolutionary movement was brutally suppressed in East Germany, as in all the East European countries. The Ulbricht group, which had been flown into eastern Germany from Moscow, saw its main task in stifling every independent initiative of the working class and dissolving all independent socialist and anti-fascist committees and replacing them with its own.

On this basis, it had initially been planned to leave the capitalist ownership structures untouched. It was only under pressure from the working class and Washington's increasingly aggressive policy against the Soviet Union that the bureaucrats began, in 1948, to extend the socialist property relations of the 1917 October Revolution to the buffer states. The bourgeois state remained in place, however, and even old Nazi functionaries remained in office in the lower and middle ranks.

The anti-working class character of the GDR state became clear when, on June 17, 1953, hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets against further increases in workloads and were then crushed by Soviet tanks. At least 200 workers were shot dead. The construction of the Berlin Wall eight years later was driven by the fear that such uprisings could be repeated and spread to the whole of Berlin. The Wall was an instrument to divide the working class and keep it under control.

Despite this bureaucratic deformation, the transfer of socialist property relations, which had emerged from the October Revolution in Russia, represented social progress. The planned economy created the basis for substantial industrial development and increased prosperity. The Fourth International, therefore, defined the countries of Eastern Europe as "deformed workers' states." With the emphasis on "deformed," the ICFI affirmed that the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism historically weighed much more heavily than the limited social progress in the buffer states.

It was only because the Kremlin bureaucracy made every effort to suppress the revolution in both the West and the East that the German bourgeoisie was able to stabilise its power in the western part of the country. The old fascist elites in business, politics and the state apparatus remained in power. There was to be no revolution to drive out Hans Globke (Chief of Staff of the German Chancellery in West Germany from October 28, 1953 to October 15, 1963); the industrialist Krupp dynasty, whose workshops had benefited from slave labour at Auschwitz; and former Nazi General Reinhard Gehlen, who went on to found the West German secret service. The same corporations that had tortured millions of forced labourers to death, made lampshades out of human skin and pillows out of human hair, were now exploiting the West German working class again. In the slipstream of the USA, they quickly rebuilt their economic power.

None of the contradictions that had led to the two world wars and ultimately to the greatest crimes in human history had been resolved by the post-war order. The German elites again pressed for greater independence and dominance in Europe. German reunification and the appropriation of the Eastern territories was, from the beginning, the revanchist goal of the German bourgeoisie.

From 1970 onwards, Social Democrat leader Willy Brandt's new *Ostpolitik* opened up markets and workers for exploitation in the East for West German industry. In the 1980s, the elites were already once again discussing how Germany, as a middle-sized power, should align itself internationally, which in the late 1980s "historians dispute" was already accompanied by the justification of Nazi crimes.

Reunification

With reunification, the imperial wishes of the German ruling class were fulfilled. It annexed to itself the territories of the GDR, which had been

denied it since the defeat of the war. The German bourgeoisie did not require a single one of the 4,600 tanks the Bundeswehr possessed in the mid-1980s; it was presented to them on a silver platter by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Despite the economic successes based on the planned economy in the 1950s and 60s, the Stalinist doctrine of “socialism in one country” had cut off the GDR from the world market and rapid technological developments, just like the other states of the Eastern Bloc. With the globalisation of production, the export-oriented economy of the GDR, in particular, finally fell deeper and deeper into crisis.

Under these circumstances, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union decided to restore capitalism and plunder the state-owned property. In 1989, Socialist Unity Party (SED) General Secretary Erich Honecker in East Berlin hesitated to follow in the footsteps of Soviet leader Gorbachev. But the majority of the SED leadership had long since decided on taking the path toward capitalism. Even before the Berlin Wall came down, the SED Central Committee toppled Honecker and replaced him first by Egon Krenz and then by Hans Modrow, who later confessed in his memoirs, “In my opinion, the path to unity was inevitable and had to be taken with determination.”

The vast majority of those who had taken to the streets in November 1989 against the SED dictatorship did not want the restoration of capitalism. But it became clear that decades of repression of Marxism and every independent movement of the working class had left deep marks. The demonstrations were able to be dominated by the right-wing faction of the bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeois forces of the “Round Table” and steered towards reunification.

The events of November were not a revolution, but the beginning of a social counterrevolution that destroyed all social achievements and ushered in an unprecedented cultural decline in both East and West. It paved the way for the resurgence of German militarism and the rise of the extreme right.

The Stalinist bureaucracy played a central role in pushing through this programme. As the ruling party, and later as the renamed Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), it made every effort to suppress strikes and protests against factory closures and wage cuts. It was supported in this by the Pabloites of the United Secretariat, who had broken with Trotskyism in the 1950s and transformed themselves into fervent defenders of Stalinism.

In November 1989, the leader of the United Secretariat, Ernest Mandel, travelled personally to East Berlin to denounce the Trotskyists of BSA in the pages of the central organ of the Stalinist youth organisation FDJ. On the mass demonstration of November 4, the BSA had called for the overthrow of the SED-bureaucracy and the establishment of workers’ councils. Mandel condemned this as an impermissible intervention from outside and backed the SED. In January 1990 Mandel’s supporters in the “United Left” even joined the last SED-led government of Hans Modrow.

The Pabloites, like the Stalinists, used the bureaucracy’s old lie that the Stalinist dictatorship was “really existing socialism.” But they no longer derived from this the idolisation of the Kremlin bureaucracy, but the alleged failure of socialism. After German unification, the Pabloites entered the PDS, which today, as Die Linke, is supporting the social attacks, police state measures and imperialist interventions of the German bourgeoisie.

The perspective of the ICFI

The BSA, as the German section of the ICFI, was the only political tendency, which, in 1990, advocated a progressive perspective against capitalist reunification. It was able to do so because it based itself on the international perspective of the Fourth International, which had been brutally suppressed both by the Stalinists and by the Nazis.

After countless Trotskyists had been murdered in the Nazi labour camps and gas chambers for fighting for the revolutionary overthrow of the

Hitler regime, those who survived in the East were imprisoned by the SED regime. The Trotskyist Oskar Hippe was sentenced to 50 years in a labour camp by a Soviet military tribunal in 1949 and spent eight years imprisoned in the GDR under the worst conditions.

The Stalinist bureaucracy, which had formed as a cancer on the first workers’ state, could only maintain its power by physically annihilating the leaders of the October Revolution and an entire generation of revolutionary Marxists and by suppressing and falsifying Marxism. Far more than imperialism, it feared Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, who declared that the gains of the October Revolution could only be defended against the bureaucracy in a political revolution.

Trotsky had already foreseen in 1938 that the Stalinists would otherwise restore capitalism. “Either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism,” he wrote in the founding program of the Fourth International

This position was defended by the International Committee since the 1950s, against the revisionist positions of Pabloism, which claimed the emergence of the deformed workers’ states represented proof of the progressive role of Stalinism.

Based on this historical understanding of Stalinism, the BSA equally opposed the West German bourgeoisie, the Stalinist bureaucracy, and the petty-bourgeois forces of the Round Table and their pseudo-leftist appendages, who worked together for capitalist restoration. When hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 4, 1989, party members smuggled masses of leaflets across the heavily guarded frontier.

In these it stated, “The political revolution, the overthrow of the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy by the working class in the Soviet Union and other countries dominated by it” was “an integral part of the programme of world socialist revolution. Only through the political revolution can the achievements of October, especially the state-planned economy, be defended and purged of all bureaucratic degenerations, can the Soviet and Eastern European working class be united with its class brothers in the capitalist West for the completion of the world socialist revolution and the construction of socialism.”

The BSA based its intervention on the assessment of the Trotskyist world movement. The ICFI had already warned in the 1980s, when enthusiasm for Gorbachev was at its height, that he was preparing for capitalist restoration. The globalization of production had increased the pressure on the isolated economies of the Eastern bloc and stripped the basis of the Stalinist program of “building socialism in one country.” Gorbachev responded by seeking to integrate the Soviet Union into the world economy on a capitalist basis and defending the privileges of the bureaucracy, as Trotsky had predicted, by transforming it into capitalist private property.

The ICFI had understood that the crisis of the Stalinist regimes was an expression of a crisis of the entire imperialist world system. The globalization of production had increased the contradiction between the world economy and the nation-state on which capitalism is based and exacerbated the conflicts between the imperialist powers.

“Far from entering into a new and triumphant period of capitalist ascendancy, imperialism stands on the brink of a new bloody epoch of wars and revolutions”, declared David North, chairman of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, on 6 January 1990, “The new equilibrium that will be necessary for capitalism will only be worked out after a period of profound struggles and eruptions of all sorts, of wars and revolutions. In other words, contradictions have been set into motion that cannot be peacefully resolved. So this is the question confronting the working class, that it must resolve this crisis on a progressive basis or it will be resolved by capitalism on an extremely

reactionary one.”

North also explained that the collapse of the Stalinist regimes was an expression of the bankruptcy of all nationally oriented bureaucracies. “Just as the breakdown of the Eastern European regimes signifies the collapse of the national program of the Stalinist bureaucracies, the defeats experienced by the working class in the capitalist countries during the past decade demonstrate the bankruptcy of the national program of the social democratic and reformist bureaucracies. Just as there is no place for a nationally-isolated “socialist” state, there is no place for trade unions based on national-reformist policies.”

Both analyses have been fully confirmed over the past 30 years. After 30 years of incessant wars, the imperialist powers continue to arm and prepare more and more openly for a Third World War. This strengthening of militarism and the historically unprecedented social polarization are the reason for the return of fascism in all imperialist countries.

The former nationally oriented workers' organizations have transformed into purely bourgeois organizations that play a key role in smashing the last social rights of workers and preparing imperialist wars.

At the same time, resistance to these policies is growing. The perspective of international socialism, which has been defended only by the International Committee, is the key issue under these conditions. As in the first half of the last century, humanity faces the alternative: socialism or barbarism. The construction of the SGP and sections of the ICFI in other countries is the most important condition for overthrowing capitalism and preventing a relapse into war and fascism.



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