

The COVID-19 pandemic, the return of the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
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The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, held its party congress November 19–22. We publish here the resolution unanimously adopted by the delegates. The new national committee elected Christoph Vandreier as chairman and Dietmar Gaisenkersting as deputy chairman of the SGP. Long-time party chairman Ulrich Rippert was elected honorary chairman by the national committee, and Johannes Stern was elected publisher and editor-in-chief of the German-language edition of the World Socialist Web Site.

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1. The Party Congress of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is taking place under extraordinary conditions that require a decisive development of our political work. Two years ago, on the basis of a review of the history of the Trotskyist movement, we concluded that it had entered the fifth phase of its history. This is characterised by the intersection of the programme and principles of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) with a new revolutionary upsurge of the global working class. Under these conditions, the interventions of the party are themselves a decisive element of the objective development and take on the greatest significance. This is evident in regard to all important political questions.

The pandemic and the fight to eliminate COVID-19

2. Since the beginning of the crisis, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the ICFI have called the pandemic a trigger event that enormously accelerates the already advanced economic, social and political crisis of the world capitalist system.

3. The outbreak of the pandemic came at a time already characterised by massive social inequality, a turn by the ruling class towards authoritarian forms of rule and a growth of imperialist militarism that conjures up the threat of a third world war. The virus knows no national borders; every country is shaken by the same social and political conflicts. This worldwide crisis, which has already cost millions of lives, requires a global solution.

4. After almost two years since the outbreak of the pandemic, more than 5 million people have officially fallen victim to the virus—more than 1.3 million of them in Europe and almost 100,000 in Germany. Such numbers are unprecedented outside of wartime, and the actual death toll is far higher. According to an excess mortality tracker compiled by the *Economist*, the real death toll worldwide is 16.7 million people, about the same as in World War I. Every month, nearly 200,000 people die from COVID-19.

5. In the midst of this wave of mass death, governments around the world are declaring the pandemic over and abolishing the remaining protective measures—with disastrous consequences. With their decision to end the designated “epidemic situation,” the outgoing and incoming

German federal governments are provoking a situation that even dwarfs last winter’s catastrophe. The director of the World Health Organisation (WHO) for Europe, Hans Kluge, warns that there could be 500,000 more deaths from the coronavirus in Europe in just three months.

6. Behind the politics of death, which the German government is forcing on all of Europe, lies definite political and economic interests. The ruling class wants to squeeze the gigantic sums that flowed to the big banks and corporations in the so-called coronavirus bailout packages in the spring of 2020 out of the working class. Another factor behind the ruthless policy of deliberate mass infection is the geostrategic and economic ambition of German imperialism. Berlin regards the pandemic as an opportunity to organise the European Union (EU) even more strongly under German leadership and position itself against its international rivals. It intends to “ensure that Europe emerges economically strong from the pandemic on the basis of sound and sustainable public finances,” as the exploratory paper of the “traffic light” coalition [comprising the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP)] asserts. This would require “greater cooperation between the national European armies” and better equipment for the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces).

7. The WWSW and ICFI have stressed that the fight against the pandemic is not just a medical question. Like the fight against social inequality, war and dictatorship, it requires the independent political intervention of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme.

8. We have drawn a parallel with the First World War, which, after it broke out in August 1914, developed with an ever more terrible momentum. Death was normalised, ever new masses of young people were sent to the front and consumed as “human material.” The war could not be ended, despite the suffering, because the geopolitical and economic interests of the capitalist warmongers made a peaceful solution impossible. To end the war, the working class of all belligerent countries had to be mobilised on the basis of a revolutionary socialist programme. This was the perspective of Lenin and Trotsky, which found powerful confirmation in the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, when the working class overthrew bourgeois rule and took over the leadership of society.

9. Like the struggle against war, the struggle against the pandemic is a class and revolutionary question. In our election appeal for the federal election, we declared: “The fight to contain the pandemic is developing into a class struggle, which is showing ever more clearly that the two major classes in society, the capitalist class and the working class, have irreconcilable interests.”

10. The dividing line between pandemic control strategies has been highlighted by the WWSW in two important webinars with internationally renowned scientists. The capitalist class is pursuing either the strategy of “herd immunity”—i.e., overt contagion—or limited containment known as

mitigation. Both strategies amount to the mass infection of the population with the virus and mean that millions of people die avoidable deaths or suffer long-term health consequences year after year.

11. In contrast to the official policy of mass death and social misery, we fight in the working class for the global elimination of SARS-CoV-2 to save lives. This socialist policy includes: Immediate lock-down of all schools and non-essential businesses until the pandemic is under control! Full wage payment for all affected workers, as well as real assistance for the self-employed and comprehensive support for poor households! A globally coordinated vaccination programme instead of vaccine nationalism and hucksterism!

The SGP supports the initiative of the WWS international editorial board for a Global Workers' Inquest, an international investigation by workers into the coronavirus pandemic. We will mobilise all our forces to develop this initiative and uncover the crimes committed by the ruling class in the pandemic during the last two years. In parallel, we will strengthen the fight for the implementation of the scientifically necessary measures to eliminate SARS-CoV-2 globally.

This will require, above all, the development of rank-and-file committees for safe workplaces and education. The fight against the pandemic must be taken to schools and workplaces through the development of a globally coordinated campaign. To this end, the ICFI has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This will serve as the central hub for coordinating the global struggles of the working class to end the pandemic and save millions of lives. Its development must go hand in hand with the building of the SGP and ICFI as the socialist leadership of the working class to link the struggle against the pandemic with the struggle against social inequality, war, dictatorship and the capitalist system.

The fight against climate change

12. In the fight against climate change, humanity confronts the same fundamental challenges as in the pandemic. Like the coronavirus, greenhouse gases know no state boundaries. In the mounting natural disasters of recent years—including this summer's devastating flood that killed hundreds in Germany—the ruling elite's indifference to human life and the future of the entire planet is evident.

13. The climate question, like all major social questions—social inequality, coronavirus pandemic, right-wing extremism, refugee policy and war—is a class question. And it requires an international response. Such a response is incompatible with capitalism, which bases itself on profit maximisation and the competition between nation-states and which tramples on scientific warnings.

The task of the SGP is to orient the struggle against climate change towards the working class. It is the only social force with a fundamental interest in transforming society to meet social needs, not private profit. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) will strengthen its efforts to win influence among apprentices, pupils and other sections of working class youth. The IYSSE intervenes in mass protests—such as on climate change—to clarify fundamental questions of political perspective within a new generation of young people being radicalised today. Developing a socialist response to the climate crisis requires a constant polemic against Green and pseudo-left currents that seek to subordinate the climate movement to the interests of finance capital on the basis of protest politics.

The return of the class struggle and the building of Rank-and-File Committees

14. The objective conditions for world socialist revolution are well advanced. At the beginning of 2020, the International Committee declared in its New Year's Statement that the 2020s would be a decade of social revolution. This prognosis was based on an analysis of the advanced social and political crisis of the capitalist system. Developments since then

have fully confirmed this analysis.

15. Explosive resistance is developing among workers and youth worldwide against the pandemic policies of the ruling class and the related attacks on jobs and wages. In the spring of 2020, a wave of spontaneous strikes in key auto, manufacturing and food factories in North America and Europe forced capitalist governments to impose the first lockdowns. In the autumn of 2020, there were protests against the reopening policies, including school strikes in Greece, France and Germany.

16. Now, strikes and protests are once again developing around the world against mass death and attacks on jobs and wages. Everywhere, governments and corporations, with the help of the unions, are using the coronavirus pandemic to push through historic attacks. In Germany, the ruling class is planning a full frontal attack. Especially in the industrial sector, which accounts for 31 percent of all jobs (in Britain, France and the US, it is about 20 percent), a huge upheaval is imminent. In the auto industry alone, half a million jobs are on the cuts list.

17. Workers are no longer willing to accept this without a fight. In the US, the centre of world capitalism, the biggest strike wave in decades is currently developing. Germany's federal election also took place under the pressure of numerous strikes and protests. Two features, long foreseen by ICFI, characterise these class struggles: they have become internationalised to a previously unimaginable degree and are developing as a coherent world movement; and they are taking the form of a rebellion against the corporatist unions.

18. In this situation, our party's intervention is increasingly becoming the decisive factor in the development of the class struggle. In May, the ICFI and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to create a "framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organisations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale." This initiative is now being taken up by workers who have formed rank-and-file committees in the US—for example, at Volvo Trucks, at Dana and John Deere. Here in Germany, teachers, educators and parents and bus drivers have formed the first rank-and-file committees for safe workplaces and education.

This offensive must now be taken forward. It is the party's task to politically orient and lead the workers in struggle. We have not only commented on but actively intervened in the strikes and protests of the WISAG airport workers, train drivers, nurses, Gorillas delivery riders and auto workers. We have argued for a political and organisational break with the nationalist unions and patiently clarified key questions of political orientation and perspective. To develop a network of independent rank-and-file committees and build the IWA-RFC internationally, the SGP and ICFI must be built as a socialist leadership in the working class.

The struggle against militarism and war

19. Above all, the pandemic has also exacerbated the threat of war. The US government not only accuses China of being responsible for the pandemic, but is also preparing more and more directly for a military conflict with nuclear powers Russia and China. The European powers are also using the crisis to further arm themselves.

20. The contradictions of world capitalism, which the ruling class tried to resolve in the last century by means of war and fascism, are once again concentrating in Germany. Escalating trade wars and great power conflicts are undermining the German export industry. The escalating conflict between the US and China presents the German bourgeoisie with an insoluble dilemma. If it allies itself with the US against China, it risks losing its export market and investments in China. If it opposes the US, it will be up against the world's largest military power and will also have to put up with economic disadvantages.

21. The attempt to organise Europe into a "third, world power" under German leadership is exacerbating the conflict not only with Washington, but also with its European "allies." The extent of the tensions between the

European powers is shown by Brexit and the dispute over Northern Ireland, the escalating conflict over the AUKUS pact and fishing rights between Britain and France, and the growing disputes between the EU and Poland and Hungary. The escalating economic, social and political crisis brings back all the unresolved problems of European and German capitalism in the 20th century.

22. The SGP has prepared the working class for this development. In 2014, we issued a resolution analysing the objective driving forces of the return of German militarism and warned of its far-reaching implications. Just a few months after then-Foreign Minister and now Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) announced at the Munich Security Conference that Germany was “too big and economically too strong for us to comment on world politics only from the sidelines,” we wrote:

History is returning with a vengeance. Almost 70 years after the crimes of the Nazis and its defeat in World War II, the German ruling class is once again adopting the imperialist great power politics of the Kaiser’s Empire and Hitler. ... The propaganda of the post-war era—that Germany had learnt from the terrible crimes of the Nazis, had “arrived at the West,” had embraced a peaceful foreign policy, and had developed into a stable democracy—is exposed as lies. German imperialism is once again showing its real colours as it emerged historically, with all of its aggressiveness at home and abroad.

23. Since then, the correctness of this assessment has become increasingly clear. The grand coalition increased the defence budget by almost 20 billion euros in the last eight years, organised new war missions in Africa and the Middle East, stationed combat troops on the Russian border and recently even sent a warship to the Indo-Pacific. The next federal government will further intensify this course of great power politics and war. The plans for this have long been prepared. In May, the Ministry of Defence adopted the “Cornerstones for the Future of the Bundeswehr,” which are intended to prepare the German military for the conduct of major military conflicts, up to and including nuclear war.

The threat of a devastating third world war lends enormous urgency to building an anti-war movement of the international working class aimed at eliminating the cause of war—the capitalist profit system—and organising a global socialist society. The SGP will work closely with its sister organisations in the ICFI in this effort. In Europe, these are the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, the Parti de l’égalité socialiste in France and the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu in Turkey. The struggle against a relapse into war and barbarism on the continent is directly linked to the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

The right-wing danger and the SGP’s lawsuit against the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz, secret service)

24. As in the 1930s, the ruling class around the world is responding to the deep crisis of capitalism by turning to authoritarian forms of rule and fascism. The programme of deliberate mass infection, inequality and war is incompatible with democratic rights. Donald Trump’s attempted coup on January 6 and the cowardly stance of the Democratic Party have shown that significant sections of the bourgeoisie set their hopes in or condone authoritarian forms of rule. Jair Bolsonaro’s plans for a coup in Brazil and the conspiracies in the Spanish and French militaries are also expressions of this.

25. In Germany, this development is particularly advanced. Four years ago, when the SPD and CDU (Christian Democratic Union) negotiated the relaunch of the grand coalition behind the backs of the people, we called it the most right-wing government since the end of the Nazis. This was confirmed in particular during the pandemic, in which the government

pushed through the aggressive “profits before lives” policy, transferred hundreds of billions to the banks and corporations, and pushed through the massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr.

26. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was made the official leader of the opposition and integrated into the political establishment. Its programme—social attacks, massive increasing of state powers internally and externally and herd immunity policies—is de facto being put into practice by all government parties. As before with Pegida, the right-wing dregs have been mobilised with the Querdenker (Q Anon-type) demonstrations to intimidate opposition.

27. How directly the ruling class implements the programme of the extreme right can also be seen in refugee policy. It consists of the brutal sealing off of “Fortress Europe,” the erection of border fences and closed camps for refugees, and mass deportations to the war zones of the Middle East.

28. At the same time, right-wing extremist terrorist networks are systematically protected and built up by the state apparatus. The true extent of the neo-Nazi NSU and its close involvement with the state security apparatus remain in the dark even 10 years after its unmasking and the murder of District President Walter Lübcke by a perpetrator from the periphery of the NSU. The leaders of the Hannibal network and other right-wing terrorist networks in the Bundeswehr and the police remain at large despite murder plans and weapons discoveries, and the right-wing-extremist and anti-Semitic terrorist attacks in Halle and Hanau.

29. Like the fight against war, the fight against fascism, increasing state powers and the abolition of democratic rights can only be waged through the building of an independent working-class movement. In this regard, the SGP’s lawsuit against the Verfassungsschutz—itsself a centre of the far-right conspiracy—is of the utmost significance. With its attack on the SGP, the ruling elite has recognised that the programme and ideas of our movement have potential to find mass support in the working class. The SGP lawsuit has turned the tables. The appearance of Ulrich Rippert and Christoph Vandreier before the Berlin Administrative Court on November 18, 2021, stands in the best traditions of the revolutionary German workers’ movement.

30. In declaring that history was of no significance—in other words, that one can forget the concentration camps and gas chambers—the court lost all legitimacy. Its decision, essentially to declare the theoretical foundation and programme of Marxism illegal, was a further attempt to realise the aims Bismarck sought to implement in 1878 and Hitler proclaimed in 1920: the complete destruction of Marxism.

31. But we do not live in the Germany of 1878 or 1933, nor in the world of the 19th or 20th centuries. The court case took place not following massive defeats of the working class, but under conditions of the rise of a new mass movement of the German, European and international working class. In its actions before the court, the SGP has proven its capacity to lead the working class in struggle against the right-wing-extremist conspiracy within the state apparatus.

The SGP will massively expand its offensive against the attack by the Verfassungsschutz and for the defence of democratic rights. This includes defending refugees as well as fighting for the unconditional freedom of Julian Assange and campaigning against the censorship of the WSWS and other websites of leftists, anti-war activists and socialists. The broad support for our lawsuit shows that after the experiences with Bismarck and the Nazis, the working class will not accept new anti-socialist laws.

The fight against the “traffic light” coalition

32. In the face of the all-party coalition, the population has become alienated from the party system as a whole. This was evident in the federal elections. Not only did the grand coalition once again lose massive numbers of votes, there was no party able to win more than a quarter of the voters.

33. With the formation of a traffic light coalition, the ruling class plans

to intensify the policies of the grand coalition. Already during the election campaign, the SPD, Greens and FDP had announced a massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr, which is to exceed even the NATO target of 2 percent of GDP. In addition, the parties announced a more aggressive course against the nuclear powers Russia and China.

34. The first decision publicly announced by coalition officials was to phase out the designated “epidemic situation.” This would roll back all measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. There would no longer be any limits to the politics of mass infection in the interests of profit-making. Rapidly rising incidence levels would inevitably lead to thousands of hospitalised and children and adolescents dying.

35. At the same time, in their exploratory paper, the traffic light coalition partners committed themselves neither to raising the debt ceiling nor to taxing the rich. The hundreds of billions that have flowed to the banks and corporations are to be extracted from the working class. This is part of a full frontal attack on the working class. In addition to the social cuts, mass layoffs and wage cuts of historic proportions are planned in the wake of the move to electric vehicles and other restructuring.

36. The SPD, which has been responsible for most of the social cuts over the last 23 years, will work even more closely with the unions to launch the frontal attack against the workers. In the auto industry, IG Metall is officially pursuing the goal of “shaping the transformation”—i.e., helping to cut jobs. It will use its army of shop stewards, works council representatives and other officials to suppress any independent working-class movement against this.

37. In the Greens, the party that together with the SPD organised Germany’s first war operations since the end of World War II between 1998 and 2005 and launched the Hartz laws condemning millions to poverty is returning to government. The former pacifists specialise in using phrases about environmental protection and human rights, and on the basis of identity politics, to mobilise wealthy layers of the petty bourgeoisie in support of fierce social attacks and aggressive militarism.

38. The FDP is a paid lobbying association of the banks and corporations with fascist roots. After the war, it offered a home to many former Nazi Party and SS members. Just two years ago, its Thuringia state chairman Thomas Kemmerich had himself elected minister president by the AfD. The sudden friendship between the Greens and the FDP embodies the alliance between wealthy middle-class layers and the financial oligarchy against the growing working-class movement.

39. The Left Party is also indirectly involved in the traffic light coalition. After its dreams of government participation were dashed, in view of its disastrous election results, it is offering itself as a loyal opposition to the federal government. At the state level, it forms pacts with the Hartz IV and war parties in Berlin, Bremen, Thuringia and probably soon in Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania. This is in line with its own right-wing programme. It agreed to the transfer of billions to the rich, enforces the herd immunity policy in the Länder (federal states) and advocates foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr. The extreme right-wing positions of its front woman Sahra Wagenknecht serve to mobilise the most backward elements in society and are the sharpest expression of the complete bankruptcy of the Left Party.

40. Completely bankrupt are also the pseudo-Trotskyist groupings against which the ICFI has fought since its founding 68 years ago. They are reacting to the demise of the Left Party by clinging to it even more tightly. With Janine Wissler, Marx21 now provides one of the Left Party’s two leaders. Despite Wagenknecht’s far-right positions, the SAV opposes her expulsion and campaigns for party support under the slogan “Stay and fight in the Left Party anyway!” The German Morenoites in RIO collaborate closely with this essentially right-wing tendency inside the Left Party to block and suppress an independent movement of the working class. The SGP is literally the only political party that fights the traffic light coalition from the left and with a socialist programme.

41. The working class will inevitably come into conflict with the new coalition and all the parties in the Bundestag. The SGP has prepared the working class politically for this confrontation. In the election campaign, we decisively opposed the all-party coalition and fought as the only party for an international, socialist programme. In our election appeal, we stressed: “No social problem can be resolved without expropriating the banks and major corporations and placing them under the democratic control of the working class. Their profits and wealth must be confiscated, and the trillions given to them over the past year must be returned. The world economy must be reorganised on the basis of a scientific, rational plan.”

The struggle for socialism

42. To carry out this programme, the SGP and ICFI must be built as the new mass party of the working class. This requires the development of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the building of the IYSSE and the education and recruitment of a Marxist cadre in the workplaces.

43. The party congress reaffirms the “Party Executive Committee Resolution on the 2021 Recruitment Campaign,” which set ambitious goals for recruiting workers into the party. The resolution stresses—drawing on the lessons of the Egyptian revolution—that the SGP “must do everything in its power to establish a meaningful political presence within the working class before the outbreak of mass struggles.”

44. The growing opposition and increasing struggles of workers must be transformed into a conscious movement for socialism. The central historical task facing the SGP and the Fourth International was summed up by Trotsky in the founding programme of the Fourth International: to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class.

45. In order to fulfil this historic task and thus meet the demands of the global development of the class struggle, the cadre of the SGP must draw on the entire theoretical and political capital of the Trotskyist movement, which has defended the program of international socialism against Stalinism and Social Democracy. Fifty years ago, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA) was founded as the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. In doing so, the working class reconnected with the Marxist tradition that had been destroyed by the crimes of the Nazis and the betrayals of Social Democracy, Stalinism and Pabloite revisionism.

46. In the 1985–1986 split from the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the BSA supported the critique of the Workers League led by David North and sided with the International Committee. In confronting the petty-bourgeois nationalists, the IC renewed the entire historical, political and theoretical heritage of the Fourth International. This heritage is the firm basis on which the work of the SGP must now be expanded and developed, and sections of the Fourth International established throughout Europe and internationally.



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