“The AfD did not fall from the sky”: Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei discusses how the fascists can be defeated

Our reporters
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On the evening of September 15, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) held a public online discussion as part of its Berlin state election campaign, titled, “What is the AfD, and how can it be defeated?”

The event was prompted by the AfD’s recent election victory in Saxony-Anhalt, the demonstrations by tens of thousands against the far right, and the upcoming state elections in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin. The discussion was opened by SGP chairman and Berlin lead candidate Christoph Vandreier. Many of the more than 60 participants took part in the lively discussion.

Moderator Dietmar Gaisenkersting opened the meeting by pointing to the recent demonstrations against the AfD and the urgent question of how its further advance could be stopped.

In his introduction, Vandreier firmly rejected the slogan raised by the organisers of the demonstrations: “unity of all democrats against the AfD.” This perspective was bankrupt, he said, even though it might sound plausible at first. Anyone wanting to fight a “genuinely racist, völkisch party” must not lose sight of who bears the political responsibility for Germany having reached this point.

“The AfD did not fall from the sky. The AfD is not an accident,” Vandreier stressed. It was, rather, “an expression of the shift to the right of the entire political establishment,” and its sharpest expression at that. Over the past three decades, there had been an enormous social decline and a corresponding social polarisation.

The first great shockwave of this policy had been German reunification in 1990, and the dismantling of East Germany. The then-ruling state party (SED-PDS) had founded the Treuhand, the agency that privatised the whole of East German industry and destroyed millions of jobs. What had been pushed through in the East subsequently served as a “crowbar” to create similar conditions across the whole of Germany. Central to this was the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green government’s Agenda 2010, which the Left Party also helped implement at state level.

Alongside the social catastrophe, militarisation had been organised. Vandreier recalled the 2014 Munich Security Conference, at which the foreign minister, defence minister and federal president had unanimously proclaimed the “end of military restraint.” This had first been put into practice in Ukraine, where Berlin supported the 2014 Maidan coup, which had relied “essentially on right-wing extremist forces.”

The resulting war in Ukraine had given rearmament new dimensions: €600 billion had already been earmarked for arms, and with the exemption from the debt brake as much as €1–2 trillion could be made available. Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Defence Minister Boris Pistorius openly declared that within three years, Germany must be capable of militarily defeating the nuclear power Russia—“utter madness.”

This policy was supported by every party. The AfD had been the first to demand 5 percent of GDP for arms spending, the Sahra Wagenknect Alliance (BSW) also supported rearmament, and the Left Party had voted for the rearmament package in the Bundesrat (upper house of parliament). By implementing social cuts and militarism, all the parties had, on the one hand, prepared the ground for the AfD, and, on the other, “put the far right’s programme into practice.”

Vandreier drew the lessons of history: even before 1933, the ruling class had relied on authoritarian rule. Rearmament and the breach of the Treaty of Versailles had already begun before Hitler, first under the Brüning government, then under the presidential cabinets of von Papen and Schleicher. When these proved incapable of carrying out the programme, the ruling class turned to Hitler.

“It was not the population that elected Hitler,” Vandreier stressed. In the last free elections, Hitler had received only 33.1 percent, far short of a majority. It was a conspiracy of President von Hindenburg, media magnate Alfred Hugenberg and a series of capitalists that brought Hitler to power. The only way to stop Hitler would have been the mobilisation of the working class—a general strike and revolution. But the leaders of the SPD and Communist Party (KPD) prevented the formation of a united front.

Today, however, there were fundamental differences from the 1930s. The AfD was “not a fascist mass party.” It was being elected because all the other parties were hated, and it was able to exploit opposition to war and social cuts. “Today,” he said, “the working class has not yet even begun to fight. And it is only for this reason that the AfD can turn this opposition into grist for its own reactionary mill.” In the event of real struggles by the working class—mass strikes against mass layoffs, mass demonstrations against the war—the AfD would “reveal its class position in the shortest possible time.”

The absence of such struggles was due to the trade unions, which “suppress every independent action by workers” and act as a “company police force,” as well as to the SPD and Left Party, which themselves carry out the social cuts. The decisive task was therefore the fight for the independent programme of the working class: the expropriation of the major banks and corporations, their democratic control by the workforce, a society in which human needs are at the centre, not profit. The slogan “all democrats together against the AfD” served only to chain workers to parties that were themselves moving to the right. In this analysis, the SGP based itself on the traditions of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky, to defend internationalism and the independence of workers from all bureaucratic organisations, against Stalinism and social democracy.

The ensuing discussion was marked by a range of viewpoints, which SGP speakers took up and answered. One participant stressed that the real target must be capitalism itself, not individual right-wing parties. He argued for a “new world party,” since the scattered socialist organisations

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were too weak.

Another participant, Holger, expressed scepticism about the concept of revolution and the comparison with the 1920s. He pointed to the international shift to the right, warned against branding AfD supporters wholesale as fascists, and argued for day-to-day tasks and small steps—such as the fight for free childcare places in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

Vandreier stressed that the SGP, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, was building a worldwide party and understood precisely that workers' answer to fascism and war could only be international. The decisive task consisted in making the working class into an independent force. "That requires precisely the political struggle against the SPD, the Left Party and the trade unions, which prevent workers from fighting."

In his contribution, leading SGP member Peter Schwarz took up the question of how the AfD could be stopped. Just as a doctor must make a thorough diagnosis before an operation, one first had to understand the cause of the rise of far-right parties worldwide. He pointed to Trump in the United States, at whose inauguration the five richest men in the world had sat behind him, to Le Pen in France, to whom ever more sections of the ruling elite were rallying, and to Meloni in Italy, an open admirer of Mussolini.

This development could only be understood in connection with the extreme crisis of capitalism worldwide. Thirty-five years ago, at the dissolution of the Soviet Union and East Germany, the "end of history" had been proclaimed. Today, the world once again stood in the midst of war—in Ukraine, in the Middle East—and the war against China had long been in preparation. "In reality, the real social relations are now coming to the surface," said Schwarz. The system based on private ownership of the means of production was "completely bankrupt."

The fascist movements were not movements from below but were being "stoked from above." Farage's Reform Party in Britain had just received £72 million from two businessmen—"not even [the industrialist Friedrich] Flick paid Hitler that much." Elon Musk was campaigning for the AfD. "That says more about the AfD than all the demagogic phrases it puts out. This is a party of finance capital."

Schwarz posed the question of why workers voted for this party. In the 1930s, the mass base of the Nazis had been above all the petty bourgeoisie, and the workers' parties, the SPD and KPD, had received 2 million more votes than the Nazis in the last election before the handover of power. Today, however, a relatively large number of workers voted for the AfD. The answer was not to be found in psychology, but in the fact that "every way out to the left is blocked." There was no party with mass influence offering a left-wing answer to the social crisis. According to polls, around 60 percent of AfD voters did not vote out of conviction, but in protest against the other parties.

The main responsibility for this lay with the trade unions, the Left Party and the SPD. The Social Democrats had abandoned any relationship with the working class decades ago. The Left Party was never a workers' party but had emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy of the ruling SED in East Germany. It had actively supported the introduction of capitalism—the Treuhand had been founded not by West Germany's Chancellor Kohl or East Germany's last government head Lothar de Maizière (a Christian Democrat like Kohl), but by his immediate predecessor, the last SED Prime Minister Hans Modrow and his deputy Christa Luft. The trade unions were "co-managers," who not only had a say in mass layoffs but also decided who would be dismissed. "Anyone who kicks up against the unions had better be well protected," Schwarz said.

Given the intensifying economic and social crisis, gigantic class battles were becoming inevitable. The AfD would reveal its true face and try to terrorise militant workers. This was why the party with a real perspective had to be built now.

Schwarz drew a comparison with Russia in 1917: Lenin did not call for the unity of all democrats. He had set his party against the Kerensky government, and within a few months the Bolsheviks had proven themselves to be the leadership of the working class. By the same token, no common front could be formed today with the Left Party in the name of fighting the AfD, given that it had already declared it would support a CDU state premier in Saxony-Anhalt. "How can you fight the AfD by supporting the CDU state premier?," he asked. "That's absurd." Instead, the SGP stood for building rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade unions and parties.

Another participant underlined the importance of internationalism. The rightward shift was not a purely German problem, but an expression of the crisis of capitalism worldwide. Using the example of Volkswagen and the 75,000 jobs threatened with destruction, he showed that the problems of the German car industry could not be solved within a national framework, but were bound up with global developments—above all the relationship with China—and with the question of war.

IG Metall was not organising a strike, but agreeing to job cuts. The war in Ukraine was in the interests of neither Russian nor Ukrainian workers and could only be ended through the internationalist unification of the working class—the cause for which comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk was fighting, and for which he had been sentenced to 15 years in prison.

In closing, Gaisenkersting underlined the role of the trade unions. The union apparatus was "the extended arm of the corporations." Using the example of the movement of Mercedes shop stewards in Untertürkheim and the planned one-hour protests on September 21, he made clear that it was not possible to reform the union apparatus. Action committees had to be built that consciously set themselves against the apparatus, withdrawing the mandate of the works council reps and union officials. This was what distinguished the SGP from groups such as the Stalinist German Communist Party (DKP) or the Maoist Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD), which functioned as "left fig leaves for the trade union bureaucracy."

The discussion made clear that the question of how the AfD can be defeated cannot be separated from the question of the struggle against capitalism, against war and against social cuts. The SGP called on participants to sign up, study the programme, and support the party financially—for it was only through the independent mobilisation of the working class, not through unity with the parties that are themselves driving the shift to the right, that the fascists could be stopped. "That is precisely the goal of the SGP's campaign in the Berlin state election," Vandreier stated.

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