From the youth protests to the international class struggle

Germany: IYSSE meeting discusses the perspective of the European movement

Our reporters
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The IYSSE (International Youth and Students for Social Equality) held an online meeting on Monday evening, addressing the perspective of the rapidly growing youth and workers' movement against war and social cuts across Europe. Speakers from Germany, France and the United States analysed the character of the protests and placed the question of the political independence of the working class at the centre.

Tamino Dreisam, the IYSSE's spokesman in Germany, opened the meeting with an assessment of last Saturday's demonstrations, in which more than 120,000 young people took to the streets nationwide—15,000 in Berlin alone and 10,000 each in Stuttgart and Cologne. He stressed that the spark of the movement developing in Europe had jumped to Germany, even though politicians and the media had run a massive campaign throughout the preceding week to defame the protests, portray them as violent and discuss banning demonstrations.

The protests, he said, were part of a European movement. On the same Saturday, hundreds of thousands again demonstrated in France, mass protests took place in Italy the previous Friday, and recent weeks saw large movements in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Albania and Serbia. Dreisam highlighted two characteristics: the international character of the movement and its development independently of the established organisations, including the trade unions and the alliances calling themselves "left" or "progressive", which until now organised protests only to end them again as quickly as possible.

The ruling class responded with more than 10,000 arrests and brutal police violence in France, and with the dispersal of peaceful gatherings and the use of water cannon in Germany. This showed two things, he said: governments feared a genuine mass movement and were unwilling to make any concessions whatsoever. In Germany, this raised the central question of how to wage the struggle against a government that was carrying out the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler, smashing every social gain to pay for it and responding to protests by building a police state.

Dreisam set out the IYSSE's perspective. The protests must not remain confined to appeals to the government but had to be the prelude to the mobilisation of the working class as a social force, through strikes, political strikes and factory occupations. This meant preparing a European general strike. New organisations of struggle were needed for this: rank-and-file action committees in schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods, completely independent of the trade unions and all capitalist parties and linked up across national borders. War and social cuts were two sides of the same policy—one in every four euros of the federal budget would flow into rearmament next year, financed by cuts to education, social services and health. The fight against militarism was therefore inseparable from the fight against capitalism.

France: "October 2026 is the new May '68"

Alex Lantier, national secretary of the Parti de l'Égalité Socialiste (PES, Socialist Equality Party), reported from Paris on France's deepest political crisis since the general strike of May 1968. Starting with the occupation of the Saint-Exupéry secondary school in Créteil on September 21, an open confrontation with bourgeois rule had developed. On September 29, more than 300,000 people demonstrated, and public sector workers went on strike against the government's austerity package—€54 billion in cuts and a wage freeze. On October 17 the school students joined forces with the Yellow Vests, and even the Interior Ministry counted more than 500,000 demonstrators. On October 24 the government deployed 70,000 police officers and soldiers, yet between 400,000 and 800,000 people again took to the streets.

Lantier attributed the government's intransigence not to Macron's "stubbornness" but to the bankruptcy of the French state. State debt stood at €3.5 trillion—120 percent of economic output—and servicing it would cost €65 billion this year, more than education or the military. At the same time, the wealth of French billionaires had risen 14-fold since 1996. Under "Rearm Europe," the European powers were planning up to €800 billion in additional military spending, and NATO was preparing a blockade of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

The ruling class was pursuing a dual strategy, Lantier said. On the one hand there was repression; on the other, the trade union bureaucracies and Jean-Luc Mélenchon were to bring the movement back under the control of the state. The trade union bureaucracies held the working class back for six weeks and postponed all nationwide action to a single day of strikes on 5 November. Mélenchon pointed to the Grenelle Accords of 1968 and said nothing about how 1968 ended. The Communist Party and the CGT union bureaucracy channelled the general strike into elections and thereby saved the de Gaulle government.

Lantier described October 30 as particularly significant: dockworkers in more than 100 ports in 22 countries on five continents struck under the slogan "Dockworkers don't work for war"—a sign that the working class was beginning to enter the struggle against war, although the organisers had not mentioned Ukraine once. He cited Trotsky's *Whither France?* (1936), according to which the action committees were "the revolutionary parliament" and the question of the general strike immediately raised the question of the revolutionary seizure of power. A genuine European general strike posed the question of power. The demands of young people and workers could only be realised if the working class expropriated the financial oligarchy and the European Union was replaced by the United Socialist States of Europe.

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United States: on the eve of the midterms and escalating war

Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the United States, spoke on the US midterm elections. The overarching context of the elections was global war, he said. The US was at war with Iran, was waging a war against Russia in Ukraine that threatened to become a direct conflict between nuclear powers and was preparing a war against China. Reports indicated that Trump could launch a major military operation against Iran as early as Wednesday—the day after the election.

Kishore characterised American imperialism under Trump as a "criminal syndicate." In January it had kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in a military strike on Caracas and effectively appropriated Venezuela's oil. It was trying to starve Cuba with a fuel blockade and continued to defend Israel's genocide in Gaza. War was bound up with a conspiracy against democratic rights. Trump was preparing to overturn the election results and had not ruled out deploying the military domestically.

At the same time, the class struggle was growing. Kishore pointed to an essay in the *New York Times* which lamented that the protests had begun "outside the official circles of the left" and that union officials were "having difficulty keeping pace." This showed that the mechanisms with which the ruling class had channelled social opposition for decades were eroding. The American experience nevertheless held a warning. The "No Kings" demonstrations, with millions of participants, had been taken over by the Democrats, the trade union bureaucracy and the organisations around them, and channelled behind the Democratic Party. The slogan "No Kings" had become "No Kings, Vote Early."

Kishore subjected the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to sharp criticism. It operated as a faction of the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of Wall Street and the military. DSA politician Zohran Mamdani had met Trump three times as mayor of New York and was imposing austerity measures on city workers. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez campaigned for Eugene Vindman, a former army officer and CIA Democrat who had founded a company supplying Western weapons to Ukraine. The DSA-affiliated magazine *Jacobin* praised Europe as "the world's most important bastion of social democracy" and dismissed opposition to NATO as a "fixation of the left"—a defence of German and European imperialism, which was arming itself to win its share in the redivision of the world.

The objective conditions for a socialist mass movement were developing in the US, in Germany and everywhere, Kishore said. What was missing was political leadership. Without a party of its own, the working class would see the movement co-opted or defeated, and the ruling class would respond with dictatorship and war. The problems could be solved neither within the framework of capitalism nor within that of the nation-state. Capitalism could only be overthrown on a global scale.

The return of German militarism and the legacy of Leon Trotsky

Christoph Vandreier, chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), addressed the objective foundations of the policy of war and austerity. Capitalism was in a deep international crisis. The United States had gone from being the largest creditor nation to the largest debtor nation. On the one hand this led to attacks on workers, on the other to rearmament and wars, with which it was trying to offset its decline at the expense of its rivals.

Germany was experiencing the "brutal return of German militarism." As an export nation without raw materials of its own, Germany was particularly dependent on the world market, hence the drive to secure trade routes, markets and raw materials by military means. Germany was already de facto at war with Russia, as Ukraine's most important arms supplier and financier. This tied in with a long tradition, Vandreier said. In the First World War, one of the Kaiser's main aims had been complete control of Eastern Europe, which Hitler later called "Lebensraum in the East." Ukraine, with its agriculture and raw materials, had always played a central role.

Vandreier recalled that capitalism had already led to world war twice, and that even then, the only way to prevent and stop war had been to overthrow capitalism. The First World War would not have been possible without the betrayal of the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had agreed to the nationalist programme. Liebknecht and Luxemburg in Germany, and Lenin and Trotsky in Russia, had, by contrast, proved that workers could stop the war and overthrow capitalism—in the October Revolution of 1917, which immediately began peace negotiations.

The October Revolution had been understood from the outset as part of the world revolution. Its isolation and the crushing of the German Revolution by the SPD had enabled a bureaucratic layer to destroy its gains. Out of the struggle against Stalinism and social democracy, Trotsky founded the Fourth International. These principles—internationalism, the independence of the working class and the socialist perspective—were of decisive importance today.

Today it was necessary, he said, to fight within the movement for a conscious political break with Die Linke (Left Party) and the trade unions. Die Linke was forming a coalition with the SPD and the Greens in the Berlin state executive to impose social cuts and agreed to a trillion-euro rearmament programme in the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament representing the federal states. The trade unions were organising no resistance but were pushing through mass layoffs against workers.

The question of independence at the heart of the discussion

In the discussion that followed, the question of the political independence of the working class was the central focus. Asked how today's situation differed from 1968 and whether the BRICS states represented a progressive alternative, Christoph Vandreier replied that the notion that pressure could be put on the government, or that one could rely on other capitalist powers, underestimated the confrontation. The BRICS strategy of a "multipolar world" was the strategy of world war, as the US would not voluntarily give up its dominant position. The ally in the struggle against US imperialism was not the Putin regime but the American and international working class.

Asked how the organisational independence of the spontaneous protests could develop into political independence, several speakers stressed the difference between mere leaderlessness, which was always a preliminary stage to takeover by the wrong leadership, and conscious political independence from all forces that defended capitalism. IYSSE member Joshua Seubert pointed to Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, according to which workers in spontaneous struggle could develop only trade union consciousness, while socialist consciousness needed to be brought in from outside by the revolutionary party. The October Revolution was not spontaneous but the result of decades of political work by the Bolshevik Party.

Dreisam explained that the essence of Bolshevik party building had been not primarily organisational but political, namely, Lenin's struggle against opportunism and Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which Lenin adopted in the April Theses. This decades-long political

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struggle was embodied today by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—in the confrontation with Pabloism, the analysis of globalisation and the transformation of the trade unions, and in the fight against the pseudo-left.

Peter Schwarz, international secretary of the ICFI, addressed the historical roots. The political independence of the working class went back to Marx, who after the defeat of the 1848 revolution formulated in the Address of the Central Authority to the Communist League that the task was to “make the revolution permanent.” After a period of reaction, powerful independent workers’ parties were built, the largest of which, German social democracy, capitulated in 1914. The Third International was strangled by Stalinism, whereupon Trotsky founded the Fourth International. This history was consciously embodied today by the SGP and its sister parties.

Alex Lantier closed with a report on the French protests. At a Paris university, students had asked what was to be done, since the trade unions were doing nothing. One student had explained that he was reading a book about the factory occupations of 1968—“I hadn’t known that.” Young people had been cut off from the history of the working class, but now many were asking the same questions. A targeted campaign to build the party and convey its history could now meet with a strong response.

Dreisam concluded with a call to take the situation seriously, draw the necessary conclusions and become active. The past months had been marked by a sharp escalation of war, the past weeks by the rapid development of mass demonstrations. In this period, it was necessary to make decisions and join the IYSSE in order to build the political leadership and intervene concretely in the movement.



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