

Germany: PSG election meeting in Giessen

“Everything depends on a new political development by the working class”

By our correspondent
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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) held a public meeting on December 18, 2007 to discuss the party’s socialist programme for the Hesse state election. The meeting was attended by a number of supporters and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The party’s lead candidate in Hesse, Helmut Arens, drew up a devastating balance sheet of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) state administration under Roland Koch. He paid particular attention to the wave of privatisations that has characterized Koch’s neo-liberal economic policies, detailing the prime example of the privatisation of the Giessen University Health Clinic. A few days earlier, the WSWS had carried a report including interviews with clinic staff and student medics entitled “Health does not belong in private hands.”

“What has been very noticeable so far in the election campaign is the level of general anger with official politics,” stressed Arens. According to a new opinion poll, only 15 percent of the population think economic conditions are fair. In Hesse, this anger is particularly pronounced and perfectly understandable, in view of the political balance sheet of the Koch administration, Arens said. However, in all the decisions he has taken, Koch has been able to count both on the preceding work, and tacit agreement of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Hesse. “If the SPD had seriously sought to mobilise the general population against the attacks of the Koch government,” Arens said, “Koch would never have been able to carry them through.”

At the beginning of his contribution, PSG chairman Ulrich Rippert posed the question: “Why is a new party needed?” He dealt with the breath-taking level of social polarization that has developed in Germany between the rich and poor, and described the widening gulf that separates a fabulously wealthy elite and the bottom ten percent of society who are condemned to a life of poverty. “Developments in Germany have often been belatedly compared to other countries; however, once they begin, they unfold more violently and more quickly,” Rippert explained.

He explained that the central problem facing the electorate

was that despite the existence of widespread and genuine anti-Koch sentiments, no alternative exists within official politics. A new SPD state administration would not provide a solution, since the SPD is responsible for the social attacks being carried out through its coalition with the CDU in the federal government. The “Left Party” of Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine also does not represent an alternative, since wherever it has entered government it has carried out exactly the same welfare cuts as the other bourgeois parties.

Rippert detailed the scandalously high salaries being paid to top managers, which are receiving much press coverage at present, as well as the reaction of many of Germany’s works councils (Betriebsrat -joint union-management boards) and union officials to this phenomenon. Union functionaries such as Erich Klemm at Daimler-Chrysler, Uwe Hück of Porsche and Berthold Huber, the new IG-Metall union chair and a member of the Siemens supervisory board, have publicly defended and justified this orgy of personal enrichment. The strike by German train drivers was met by the other trade unions, headed by Transnet, with open strike-breaking and defamation.

Rippert then dealt with the conditions in German society today. He explained that the American credit crisis has unleashed a financial crisis of international proportions. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be understood in this context, as well as the threat to Iran. As in the periods before the First and Second World Wars, the imperialist powers are reacting to the crisis with new struggles over access to the world’s raw materials. Germany was also preparing to participate in the struggle for these vital oil and energy resources. “In parallel with the social cuts, Germany is rapidly re-arming,” Rippert said. “We live in a society and an economic system that has failed and is headed towards disaster.”

Finally, Rippert dealt with a third development that accompanies the preparations for war—the dismantling of fundamental democratic rights. “Social inequality is incompatible with democracy,” he said. “The state is increasingly becoming a police state, one that monitors and

controls its citizens.” Social divisions lead inevitably to social explosions, and it is for this that the ruling elite is now preparing.

“But what form should our preparations take?” Rippert asked at the end of his contribution. “It requires a party that will enable the working class to intervene independently in events.” He called on all those present to actively participate in the building of such a party.

Following the contributions, a lively discussion ensued about the way in which Marxists participate in parliament and how a socialist programme could be practically implemented.

One participant raised the question: “Is it possible to participate in parliament without becoming opportunist?” A member of the Left Party complained that it is not difficult to “criticise the competition” (i.e. the Left Party), but “if one participates in parliament, how can one prevent being part of the attacks on the general population?” Another asked: “If the PSG received over fifty percent of the voices for the federal parliament, how practically would it implement socialism?”

Rippert countered, “What would a society look like in which we received fifty percent of the vote?” He explained that this would only be possible in a situation that was being convulsed by violent social conflicts, in which the Marxists had gained wide influence. “Workers will establish factory committees and workers council to politically challenge the corrupt works councils and would act independently of them. Such self-organization of the working class would play a central role in the transformation of society,” Rippert maintained.

Marxists have historically used their participation in bourgeois parliaments as a platform to educate the general population. The example of outstanding Marxists such as Karl Liebknecht shows that it is quite possible to use parliamentary work as a platform to educate the working class concerning the intrigues of the bourgeoisie, without betraying the working class.

The politicians of the Left Party, however, objectively play the role in parliament of containing the growing resistance of the general population, directing it into harmless channels. Wherever the Left Party has taken on government responsibility, it adopts the rightwing programme of the SPD and carries out the dictates of big business. The best example of this, Rippert said, was in the Berlin city legislature, where for six years a coalition of the SPD and Left Party has governed, and where more low-paid jobs have been created than anywhere else in Germany.

One participant, who reported that she had to survive on welfare payments, said: “It is impossible to take the Left Party seriously.” She explained that those looking for work faced a job market today that was dominated by temporary labour agencies, short-term contracts and low-wage labour. She described her own experiences working at a call centre that only employed people on a low-wage basis, who were expected to work even if they were ill.

Rippert reported in detail from Berlin, and pointed to the connection between the government participation of the Left Party and an increase in right-wing radicalism. “When the Left Party is involved in pushing through cuts in social programmes, when the wider population perceives it as being jointly responsible for low-wage jobs or the closure of libraries and other facilities, then this inevitably produces very great frustration. This is then immediately exploited by the right,” he explained. For example, in the Schwerin state parliament, the right-wing extremist German National Party was able to reap the fruits that had been sown by the reactionary policies of the SPD and the Left Party.

A member of the Left Party who was present vehemently denied this link. Another participant cited the experiences in France, where at the end of the 1990s, a “left-wing” government ruled for five years under Lionel Jospin. Its anti-social policies produced widespread frustration in the population which found expression in the 2002 presidential elections with the right-wing extremist Jean Marie Le Pen of the National Front coming in second, pushing Lionel Jospin into third place.

Another participant asked whether socialism meant everything was “planned and directed from above” and thus that freedom was threatened. Rippert explained that, in reality, the task of the party was a completely different one: the development of class consciousness. “Everything depends on a new political development by the working class,” said Rippert. “As the class that creates surplus value, the working class is the only social force that plays a progressive role. But it is not only oppressed physically, but also ideologically and culturally,” he explained.

Rippert said that a Marxist party would by no means dictate every decision in advance and implement it “from above.” Its goal consists in mobilizing the entire creative potential of the international working class in all its facets so that the acute problems of society could be solved.

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