

Socialist Equality Party holds meeting in Berlin on Syriza and the crisis in Greece

By Verena Nees
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The defence of Greek workers requires a united struggle by the European working class against the austerity dictates of German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble and Chancellor Angela Merkel. This was the central message at a meeting held by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG – Socialist Equality Party) last Tuesday evening in Berlin, where around 50 participants discussed the significance of recent developments in Greece, and the betrayal of the pseudo-left Syriza Party in particular.

In the days leading up to the meeting, PSG supporters campaigned at job centres, shopping centres, and underground and tram stations, receiving considerable support.

The first speaker of the evening, PSG executive committee member Christoph Vandreier, spoke about his reporting trip to Athens during the referendum. “The unconditional capitulation by Syriza following the overwhelming no vote by Greek workers against the EU austerity dictates is a critical experience,” Vandreier stated. “The lessons must be drawn from it. Workers must decisively settle accounts with Syriza and the entire milieu represented by this party.”

The crisis in Greece was not the outcome of the transgressions of the indebted country, but rather the desire of the European financial elite to make an example of Greece for the entire European working class. Vandreier explained in detail how Greece had been systematically driven in to bankruptcy following the 2008 economic crash and the subsequent trillion dollar bailout of the banks. The EU bailout payments served first and foremost to repay loans, including interest, and drove Greece’s debt ratio up from 130 percent of GDP in 2009, to 175 percent in 2013, and an estimated 200 percent in 2017.

“The real goal is to plunder the country, above all the working class,” Vandreier said. Vandreier pointed to social misery that pervades Greek society. Deep cuts to retiree’s pensions had a major impact, because many family members including grandchildren had relied on pension payments. “In a European country soup kitchens are overflowing, hunger is rampant on the streets.”

In this context that the Syriza government came to power promoting the illusion that it would be possible to achieve an easing of austerity through negotiations with the EU and the IMF, while at the same time reassuring international creditors that all debts, including interest rates, would be paid back.

“They left the rich a free hand to transfer its wealth abroad, and even raided pension funds, the universities, hospitals and state

companies in order to pay back loans due to the IMF. More than €7 billion was transferred in this way to the IMF and ECB (European Central Bank),” Vandreier explained. “Instead of appealing to the European working class, they met with Merkel and Schäuble and bent over backwards to accommodate their demands.”

The reason for Syriza’s transformation into a tool of the European financial elite was not due simply to their cowardice. Rather, Vandreier noted, it had “much more to do with their social and political orientation. Pseudo-left tendencies like Syriza and their defenders around the world speak for a privileged layer of the middle class. They utilise socialist and democratic phrases only to advance their own class interests. They are thus extremely hostile towards an independent movement in the working class.”

Pseudo-left parties around the world defended Syriza with the argument that “the balance of forces in Europe would not have allowed for an alternative policy.” As example, Vandreier named Gregor Gysi from the Left Party, who declared in the Bundestag that although he opposed the austerity diktat in Germany, he would have voted with a clear yes in the Greek parliament. The Left Party, Vandreier said, would play the same role as Syriza if it entered government in Germany.

“In reality, Syriza’s course was certainly not without an alternative,” explained Vandreier. “A government which actually wanted to end the austerity measures would have nationalised the banks on the day they were elected, imposed capital controls, and refused to pay back any debts to the creditors until an agreement was reached. They would have frozen the bank accounts of the rich and arrested all of those who transferred their money abroad illegally.”

“Above all,” Vandreier continued, “they would have based themselves on the independent political mobilisation of the Greek and European working class. Because the euro crisis proves decisively that the interests of the workers cannot be defended on a capitalist basis or within the framework of the European Union.”

Vandreier concluded by noting that such a mobilisation against capitalism and for socialism was only fought for and advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its German section, the PSG.

It was in this context that the second speaker, Peter Schwarz, Secretary of the ICFI and editor of the German edition of the WSWWS, spoke about the return of German imperialism.

“It is unprecedented and shocking, how quickly a country in

Europe has been consciously thrown back to the status of a third world country,” Schwarz said. But this would not remain confined to Greece, he warned. Not only in Spain, Portugal and France were the same conditions threatened for the working class, but also in Germany.

In this context, Schwarz dealt with the issue of the return of German imperialism. “The austerity diktat has a name: Wolfgang Schäuble.” It was Schäuble who, following the referendum, rejected Tsipras’s new austerity proposals which had been discussed with the French government, and imposed an even more brutal austerity programme.

In contrast to the claims of the media, this was not about “assistance” for Greece, the goals being pursued by the programme were, “to squeeze the last drop of blood from the Greek population, sell of state property, and transform the country in to a kind of colony for the German and European banks.”

Although it could not be excluded that the loans to Greece may one day be accounted for in the German state budget, from the standpoint of German capital, it remained a worthwhile investment. “Banks, hedge funds and other speculators make a killing. For them, the Greek rescue is a lucrative business.”

These returns are guaranteed by the agreed upon Treuhand fund, to which Greece must transfer state property worth €50 billion. In this context, Schwarz recalled the Treuhand Anstalt in the wake of German reunification in the 1990s, which played a similar role. Above all, the measures in Greece will serve as an example for the bourgeoisie on how to act against the working class throughout Europe, Schwarz stated.

The manner in which the German government enforced the austerity programme, signified “a political turning point in the development of Europe.” The return of the “German question” was being discussed internationally, the striving of Germany to emerge as a great power and dominate Europe. Joschka Fischer, the former Green Party foreign minister, criticised the German government for wanting to transform the euro zone in to a “quasi German-influenced zone,” and make Greece a “European protectorate.” But Fischer only has tactical differences with Schäuble, Schwarz said. He fears that Germany could become isolated in Europe, making its striving to become a world power more difficult.

“One can ultimately understand the return of the ‘German question’ only by considering it historically. The brutal dictates imposed on Greece is the high point to date of a development whose outlines have been apparent for some time—and about which we have warned for some time: the return of the German bourgeoisie to its historic traditions, militarism and great power politics.”

The PSG and its student and youth organisation IYSSE (International Youth and Students for Social Equality), which have been combatting the militarist policies of German imperialism and criticising its ideological defenders in the editorial offices and among professors, had come under heavy attack in the media. “But our warnings have been confirmed in Greece,” said Schwarz.

The aggressive approach of Merkel and Schäuble was not the result of individual moods or wrong policies. Rather it arose from the economic, social and political contradictions with which

Germany was confronted at the beginning of the 20th century and drove it in to World War I and World War II. After the Second World War and with the development of the Cold War these contradictions had only been temporarily concealed. With the help of the EU and euro, Germany was to be kept under control. However, the euro had actually strengthened Germany and deepened tensions with other countries, including the United States.

“If one soberly considers the situation in Europe and the world, capitalism is heading once again towards war, major class conflicts and revolutions. If the international working class does not intervene to overthrow this system, a nuclear war is inevitable,” Schwarz said in concluding his contribution. “For that, it requires a party and a programme, which unites the working class internationally, fights for workers governments and confiscates the incredible wealth hoarded at the top of society, by the banks, hedge funds and major financial institutions to reorganise the economy according to a rational plan and on the basis of social equality.”

After the two speeches, several questions were raised pertaining to how the high levels of Greek debt emerged, how a revolutionary working class movement could emerge, on the role of the trade unions, and above all, the role of the Left Platform within Syriza.

Greece’s high indebtedness was directly connected with the introduction of the euro, Schwarz explained. This opened the Greek market for goods from Germany and France, and made cheap loans accessible to the upper layers of Greek society. “This was the intention,” he said. Following the global financial crisis in 2008, interest rates for borrowing rose dramatically, and the country fell in to a vicious cycle of debt. Greece’s wealthy elite also benefited by avoiding the payment of taxes.

The betrayal by Syriza was at the centre of the discussion. One participant rejected the designation of Syriza as a whole as pseudo-left, arguing that within Syriza there were genuine lefts, in particular among the Left Platform, who had voted against the austerity measures.

Christoph Vandreier firmly rejected this position. Of the 40 members of Parliament from Syriza’s Left Platform, only two voted against the initial austerity proposals. Even the ministers and deputies who were fired or resigned declared that although they were against the austerity measures, they wanted to support the Syriza government.

“Syriza and its Left Platform represent a particular milieu,” Vandreier noted, “which is based on the standpoint which believes there are no classes in society, and above all opposes an independent movement of the working class and a socialist revolution. They try to conceal their right-wing politics with left-sounding phrases.”

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