

The PSG and the EU elections

By Frank Brenner

After the recent European Union elections, the WSWS ran a number of articles assessing the results of these elections, including the performance of the German section of the International Committee, the PSG (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit). These articles bear some comment.

First, some facts. The PSG received 9,673 votes in the election. This compares to the previous election, in 2004, where the PSG received 25,800 votes. *Which is to say that the party's vote fell by a whopping 62.5 percent.* To call this a steep decline is an understatement. Moreover, the PSG scored dead last of the 31 German parties contesting the EU election, including some very obscure and makeshift groups peddling everything from spiritual politics to the merits of internet file-sharing. This result is all the more noteworthy given that these elections were held in the midst of the global financial crisis, which is hitting the German working class hard.

So what accounts for this? Surely that should be a pressing concern for the party. But you won't find a coherent explanation in the WSWS commentary. Here is how PSG leader Ulrich Rippert handles the issue in his assessment of his party's campaign:

The PSG received 9,673 votes. While this total is significantly less than the vote won by the party in the European election five years ago, it would be a mistake to assess the significance of the elections from the narrow viewpoint of how many votes were won.¹

Now, it is true that Trotskyist parties are not electoralist machines and that votes are not the primary consideration determining our politics. But clearly votes have *some* significance. Imagine if the PSG vote had *increased* by 62.5 percent: of course the party would have trumpeted such a result as indicative of a growing influence in the working class. Indeed this is just what happened in 2004. Then the WSWS was so proud of the PSG vote that it put the vote numbers in the headline: "Socialist Equality Party of Germany receives nearly 26,000 votes". The article went on to declare: "This increase in votes is of considerable political significance. It shows that a section of workers, intellectuals and youth are beginning to seriously take up political issues and support an international socialist perspective."²

But you can't have it both ways – you can't take credit for a good result but dismiss the significance of a bad one. There is – or should be – no question that such a dramatic fall in the party's vote calls for a critical reappraisal of what the PSG has been doing to reach the working class.

But there is nothing in Rippert's report to suggest that this is going to happen. So far as he is concerned, blame for this vote loss lies with everything and everyone except the PSG. In the first of what amount to a string of excuses, he argues that five years ago the party did better because "there was a strong protest movement against the Hartz IV laws and the anti-welfare policies" of

¹ "Germany: The Significance of the Socialist Equality Party campaign," WSWS, June 12, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/euro-j12.shtml>.

² "European elections: Socialist Equality Party of Germany receives nearly 26,000 votes," WSWS, June 16, 2004: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/germ-j16.shtml>.

the previous Social Democratic Party (SPD) government of Gerhard Schroder, but that now “any hopes on the part of the working population that they could defend their interests within the framework of the parliamentary system has been dashed.” But this explains nothing because the PSG never appealed to such hopes; if anything, the dashing of these hopes should have led to *more* votes for the PSG, not less.

The same is true of his next excuse, that “the real role and identity of the European parliament has been grasped by broad layers of the electorate,” that it is “a pseudo-democratic cover” for the rule of European capital, and so there was a lot of abstentionism. But again since the PSG never fostered such illusions, it makes no sense that this accounts for the collapse of its vote. Moreover, while the overall abstention rate was high (at around 57 percent), it was no higher than in 2004; indeed the total number of votes was actually up slightly this time.

(In passing, let us note what Rippert’s excuses *imply* about the party’s vote result in 2004. If what he says is true, then it would seem that the big majority of those who voted for the PSG five years ago did so for completely misguided reasons – because they saw this vote as a way of furthering hopes “that they could defend their interests within the framework of the parliamentary system” or as an expression of their democratic illusions in the European parliament. This would mean that these votes had nothing to do with the PSG’s program, which is to say that they were random protest votes that the PSG happened to pick up. As we’ve seen, this isn’t how the WSWS presented the vote back in 2004. But if we assume nonetheless that there is some truth to this, it would mean that in *both* elections the PSG failed to make any impact on mass consciousness. If anything, that would make for an even stronger case for a critical reappraisal of the party’s work.)

Rippert has two more excuses. First, with the increasing desertion of the established parties by the masses, a plethora of small and single-issue parties have emerged that have fragmented the vote. This is true but beside the point: if the masses are deserting the established parties, then this should have *helped*, not hurt, a party espousing revolutionary Marxism, especially and above all in the midst of an economic crisis. (On the other hand, this excuse would have some validity if most of the PSG votes in 2004 were indeed just random protest votes, since there are now many more parties for these protest votes to go to. But again this would only confirm how *little* impact the PSG is having on working class consciousness.)

Finally, Rippert complains, rightly of course, that the mass media subjected the PSG campaign to “a systematic boycott,” but this too is beside the point since one can safely assume that the mass media wasn’t any less hostile to the party in 2004.

After these less-than-convincing excuses, Rippert tries to balance the negative of the vote result with more positive results: the party was able to recruit some new members and establish a few new branches, while receiving lots of “positive feedback” for its campaign. This leads Rippert to draw the following, head-spinning, conclusion:

More important than the relatively small number of votes won by the party is the fact that, together with these positive experiences, ***the election result fully confirmed the political analysis of the PSG*** (emphasis added).

So, the political analysis is “fully confirmed” – fully, no less! – even though the party lost two-thirds of its vote. One might well wonder: with a few more such ‘confirmations’, perhaps the party’s support will disappear entirely.

What does it mean to say that the political analysis is “fully confirmed”? Rippert points to the decline in support for the Social Democrats as being “a historical turning point,” which is certainly true (though it hardly requires the great analytical skills of Marxism to have noticed this). But in any case, a Marxist political analysis always assesses the correlation of class forces *for the purpose of guiding the party’s intervention in the working class*. Hence a key part of that analysis has to be an honest examination of the party’s own political practice. “The school of Lenin was a school of revolutionary realism,” Trotsky once wrote, by which he meant that the Bolsheviks “did not exaggerate success, did not distort the correlation of forces, did not try to win by shouting.”³

But Rippert’s article substitutes rationalizations for revolutionary realism. He explains away a serious political setback by invoking what has become a virtual mantra for the IC leadership – that forever and everywhere the party’s perspectives are “confirmed”.⁴ Clearly that confirmation has nothing to do with the party’s practice, and this means that theory and practice are held fundamentally apart from each other. Historically, this has been the characteristic of opportunist tendencies in the Marxist movement, but such a divide is characteristic of abstentionist and sectarian tendencies as well.

Here some of Trotsky’s warnings about sectarianism are worth citing:

[I]t is not enough to create a correct program. It is necessary that the working class accept it. But the sectarian, in the nature of things, comes to a full stop upon the first half of the task. Active intervention in the actual struggle of the working masses is supplanted, for him, by an abstract propaganda for a Marxist program ... Though he may swear by Marxism in every sentence, the sectarian is the direct negation of dialectical materialism, which takes experience as its point of departure and always returns to it. A sectarian does not understand the dialectical interaction between a finished program and a living (that is to say, imperfect and unfinished) mass struggle.⁵

This is directly relevant to Rippert’s article. Only by excluding the “dialectical interaction” between the party’s program and the mass struggles of the working class is it possible for him to proclaim that the PSG’s political line has been “fully confirmed”. All such ‘confirmations’, their Marxist rhetoric notwithstanding, are, as Trotsky says, “the direct negation of dialectical materialism.” One might add that equally bereft of dialectical insight is Rippert’s balancing of the negative vote results with “positive experiences”. Few new members will stay for very long in a movement that is stuck at the level of “abstract propaganda for a Marxist program” and is incapable of going over to an “active intervention in the actual struggle of the working masses.”

³ Leon Trotsky, “The Bolsheviks and the Soviets” in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, v. 2, p. 810: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch36.htm>.

⁴ On this point, see Alex Steiner, “The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice”: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf, pp. 56-7, and *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, chapt. 1: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf, p.22.

⁵ Leon Trotsky, “Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International,” Oct. 22, 1935: <http://permanent-revolution.org/forum/2009/05/sectarianism-centrism-and-fourth.html>.

There is, in that sense, an essential connection between the recruitment and training of new forces and the ability of the party to win a hearing from broad sections of the working class in campaigns such as elections. The road to building the party lies through finding a road to the masses.

But there is little indication that the PSG leadership is interested in moving from abstract propaganda to finding a road to the masses. We can see this if we turn our attention from the PSG vote to what is happening politically in the working class. From the EU election results it is clear (as Rippert himself notes) that many workers are deserting the traditional political parties, particularly the Social Democrats. Where are these workers going?

While the political landscape is highly fragmented, one evident trend is that some workers (the more confused and backward elements) have shifted to various right-wing populist movements. In Germany, however, a different trend has seen a significant section of workers shift to the Left Party, an amalgam of dissident Social Democrats, union bureaucrats and remnants of the old East German Stalinists.

This is an important political change in the German working class and requires careful attention by Marxists. The Left Party is unquestionably a reformist trap for the working class, a way to channel those workers wanting a break with the SPD back into bourgeois politics. So the task of Marxists is to win these workers over to a revolutionary program. The question is, how?

If you read the WSWS, you would think this can be done merely by issuing repeated denunciations of the Left Party. This is very much the attitude of the abstract propagandist. The latter conceives of political life “as a great school,” writes Trotsky, “with himself as a teacher there.” The ‘teacher’ issues proclamations and denunciations, and expects as an automatic reaction that “the working class should put aside its less important matters, and assemble in solid rank around his rostrum.”⁶ When this doesn’t happen, the propagandist ‘teacher’ simply responds with more of the same.

It is true that the aim of the Left Party is “to prevent an independent movement of the working class by creating illusions that the revival of a [reformist] program was possible,” as one recent WSWS article states.⁷ But the *support* for the Left Party is a manifestation of the disillusionment of the masses with the SPD. This means that there is necessarily a tension between the leadership of this party and its support base. That tension is already inherent in the project to revive reformism. The impossibility of that happening in the context of the current global financial crisis opens the way for Marxists to *build a bridge to socialist consciousness* for these workers.

Of course we have to be completely up-front with workers about the rotten politics of the Left Party, but we also need to *open up a dialogue with these workers* by participating in their struggles, appealing to their aspirations and posing demands that can help clarify and sharpen the inherent tensions inside this party. In other words, we need to show these workers *through their own experiences* that the only way to achieve the reforms they want is through a socialist revolution.

⁶ Trotsky, op. cit.

⁷ “Germany’s Left Party and the European elections,” WSWS, 13 June 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/left-j13.shtml>.

But an abstract propagandist balks at the “imperfect and unfinished” nature of the development of mass consciousness. The Left Party is a reactionary formation, end of story – that is very much the standpoint of the PSG. But you cannot open up a dialogue with workers if all you are doing is denouncing the party they support.

To be sure, WSWS reports have taken note of the tensions within the Left Party, but this is never for the purpose of promoting a political intervention among the supporters of this party. In the run-up to the EU elections, those tensions came out into the open with a number of prominent members, all in the party’s right-wing, resigning and claiming the party was becoming too radical. In the WSWS coverage, there was no suggestion that these tensions might express, in however distorted a form, the pressure of the masses. On the contrary, the PSG’s analysis was that these right-wingers were leaving at a time when the Left Party “is in fact shifting markedly to the right.”⁸

How then to explain these right-wingers’ resignations? The author of this article concedes that “it may appear paradoxical that prominent representatives of the right wing of the Left Party are quitting as the organization turns further to the right.” He then goes on to explain that the right-wingers want to “line up unreservedly behind the existing order,” whereas the position of the Left Party leadership of Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi is that “now is not the time to ditch their leftist rhetoric.”

But if this is true, then the party *isn’t* “shifting markedly to the right”. Rather it is tacking to the left, albeit only in its rhetoric and inconsistently (which is all you would expect from such a reformist formation). If Lafontaine and Gysi are opposed to ditching their leftist rhetoric for now, even to the point of a split with some of their right-wingers, then surely to some extent this must be due to pressure on them from their support-base in the working class. In other words, the analysis in this article is a muddle, and what is lost in this muddle is a possible opening for an important intervention by the revolutionary movement.

In another article on the Left Party’s results in the EU election, we are again told that “the Left Party is following in the footsteps of the SPD and moving further to the right. This cannot take place without internal frictions.”⁹ Again, since the “frictions” that have emerged are with the right-wing of the party, it makes no sense that the party is “moving further to the right.” But even letting that pass, if there are such “frictions” because of a rightward shift by the party, then this must mean that the party leadership is coming into increasing conflict with its base of support in the working class. All the more reason for Trotskyists to do what they can to *exploit these frictions* in order to demonstrate to these workers that only revolutionary socialism provides a way out for them.

But there is no indication in these articles that the PSG will do anything in this regard other than issue more denunciations. In other words, they will make no effort to link up in a living way with the experiences and aspirations of the many workers who currently support the Left Party.

⁸ “The German Left Party loses support and two prominent members”, WSWS, 28 May 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/may2009/left-m28.shtml>.

⁹ “Germany’s Left Party and the European elections”, WSWS, 13 June 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/left-j13.shtml>.

Instead, the WSWS seems eager to report any drop-off in support for the Left Party: “It is notable that according to opinion polls the Left Party is losing support – despite the crisis,” declared one article.¹⁰ (Alas, the same could now be said for the PSG.) When it reported on the Left Party’s EU election results, the WSWS claimed that the Party “was patently unable to profit from the decline in support for social democracy”. While the results were indeed disappointing for the Left Party, it actually *increased* its vote marginally (by 1.4 percent). Nonetheless, the WSWS rushed to conclude that this result was clear proof that “workers, the unemployed and those dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments are increasingly dismissive of this party.”¹¹ If this is true of a party that increases its vote, one can only wonder what conclusion one should draw about a party that loses two-thirds of its vote!

One gets the sense that just as the PSG confronts its own setbacks with rationalizations, so it confronts the political challenge of winning over the supporters of the Left Party with wishful thinking. This over-eagerness to write off the Left Party is really an expression of exasperation: having completely failed to get a hearing among the workers supporting this party, the PSG now hopes that it will disappear on its own. But if the Left Party is losing support, where are these workers going? *Clearly they aren’t going to the PSG.* While the demise of a reformist prop for capitalism would be welcome, the crucial question is what happens to the base of this party. If it is not being won to revolutionary Marxism, then the demise of the Left Party would actually signal a deepening of the confusion and political fragmentation of the working class.

Exasperation and wishful thinking are bad guides to revolutionary practice. The idea that the disappearance of the Left Party would somehow make it easier to recruit workers to the PSG is a dangerous illusion. So long as spontaneous consciousness still prevails in the working class, then formations like the Left Party will inevitably re-emerge, and the task of Trotskyists will again be to open up a dialogue with these workers and build a bridge for them to socialist consciousness. Only through such interventions can Marxists make it possible for workers *to consciously surmount* reformist obstacles to their political independence and liberation.

The EU election results are a warning that the PSG needs to take a long, hard look at its work. It has not begun to find a road to the masses, and it has not even placed that task on its agenda. If it doesn’t reorient itself away from sectarianism and towards the perspective embodied in *The Transitional Program*, then it will increasingly become “the direct negation” of revolutionary Marxism.

¹⁰ “The German Left Party loses support and two prominent members”, WSWS, 28 May 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/may2009/left-m28.shtml>.

¹¹ “Germany’s Left Party and the European elections”, WSWS, 13 June 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/left-j13.shtml>.