

# The deadweight of sectarianism

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I want to follow up a previous blog of mine (“The PSG and the EU elections”<sup>1</sup>) by commenting on a recent article by PSG leader Peter Schwarz called “The PSG and the German Left Party”.<sup>2</sup> While Schwarz’s article is an exchange of letters with a reader, it isn’t hard to see that he is also addressing my earlier posting (though without bothering to mention the latter, a practice all too common in the polemical style of the ICFI leadership).<sup>3</sup>

Without repeating material from the previous blog, it needs to be said that the trends analyzed there became more evident in the Sept. 27 German federal election. The Social Democrats (SPD) had their worst result since the end of the Second World War, losing over 11 percent of their vote. The other ‘natural’ governing party, the Christian Democrats (CDU), also had one of its poorest showings ever. Lesser parties – the Free Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party – all made substantial gains. The German political landscape is being altered by the seismic shifts within global capitalism.

From the standpoint of the working class, the key development is the decline of the SPD and the growth of the Left Party. It is clear that many workers and youth, facing increasingly bleak economic prospects, no longer see the SPD as a party of social reform. They identify it – rightly of course – as a pro-business, establishment party. This represents an important shift in the political consciousness of a significant section of the German working class, and that shift has manifested itself in a turn towards the Left Party.

It is this last point, evident to anyone who has followed the German political scene, which Schwarz and the PSG vehemently deny. They are happy to discuss the political decline of the SPD but see no significance, so far as the development of working class consciousness is concerned, in the growing support for the Left Party. To this end, Schwarz marshals a number of arguments, all of which repeat earlier PSG statements and none of which stand up to critical analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG\\_elections.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG_elections.pdf). In German: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG\\_Europawahl.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG_Europawahl.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “The PSG and the German Left Party: An exchange of letters,” WSWS, Sept. 28, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/sep2009/left-s28.shtml>. The article was originally posted in German: “Die PSG und die Linkspartei”, WSWS, Sept. 26, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/de/2009/sep2009/link-s26.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the letter Schwarz is responding to makes no mention of the Left Party. Schwarz, however, spends six-and-a-half pages discussing little else but the PSG’s attitude to the Left Party, which also happens to be one of the main themes of my article. Moreover, while the letter-writer, F.S., demonstrates political confusion when he calls on the PSG to collaborate with various revisionist outfits, he also criticizes the PSG’s EU election campaign very much along the lines of what I had written, a point I’ll come back to later.

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The Left Party “defends capitalist private property and the bourgeois state”, writes Schwarz. This is certainly true, and in opposition to the revisionist outfits (the German supporters of both the Militant Tendency and the British SWP) who are trying to sow illusions in the Left Party leadership, it is a point that needs to be underscored.

But that being said, the Christian Democrats also defend private property and the bourgeois state, as do the Social Democrats, the Greens, the neo-fascists etc. etc. It matters enormously in politics to understand not only what unites these various parties but also what divides them; otherwise, you abandon any basis for a successful political strategy.

It would be far more accurate to say that the Left Party is a *reformist party* that defends capitalism. It is a party that is quite obviously trying to fill the political space on the left of mainstream politics that has been largely abandoned by the SPD, and its goal is the revival of the welfare state. To say that isn't to sow illusions in the Left Party or in the project of reformism. On the contrary, the very fact that this party is attempting to resurrect the welfare state in the midst of the global financial crisis means that there will be growing tensions between the party's leadership and its political base. But in the cracks that open up within and around that party, Trotskyists have a rare opportunity to start a political dialogue with an important section of workers.

Having such a dialogue, it needs to be said, doesn't mean pulling any punches. We do everything we can to expose the reactionary policies of Lafontaine and Gysi, the wretched record of their party in local and state government, their kowtowing to the SPD and to German imperialism, their hankering after government posts etc. But it isn't enough to expose the Left Party on the WSWS, it is also necessary to *prove* to the many workers and youth who are voting for this party that it is betraying their class interests. That cannot be done solely through propagandistic denunciations. Even the most militant workers learn primarily *through their own experiences* – including their experiences with the Left Party – which is precisely why Trotskyists have to do what they can to exploit the tensions within that party in order to reach its working class base of support.

But this is something Schwarz and the PSG leadership are determined not to do. In other words, they are determined to squander an important political opportunity, which could retard the growth of the revolutionary movement in Germany for years to come.

(A further point about defining the Left Party. In countering the revisionists, Schwarz insists the Left Party “is not a centrist organization, which, under the pressure of the masses, is moving toward socialism.” It is indeed false – and dangerous – to characterize the Left Party as centrist. But the *appeal* of the Left Party clearly comes out of the growing disaffection among workers for the SPD, and so the pressure of the masses does manifest itself in support for this party. The crucial question is what will happen to that pressure: will it be harmlessly dissipated by the party leadership or channelled by Trotskyists into a locomotive force for revolution?)

Schwarz argues that the Left Party “does not have any democratic internal life”, but this is hardly an anomaly within reformist parties, nor did Trotskyists allow these obstacles to prevent them from trying to reach the workers in these parties. For Schwarz, however, the Left Party is worse than the old social democratic and Labour parties of the last century because those parties “still had mass influence among workers. The latter is lacking in the Left Party. It is not a mass party.

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The majority of its members are inactive or are pensioners and only a small section originates from the working class.”

The claim that the Left Party is not a mass party is bizarre, given the fact that it received nearly 5 million votes in the German federal election and has consistently received a similar level of support in state and national elections for the last several years. Irrespective of what its membership numbers may be (and even Schwarz concedes that those numbers are in the tens of thousands), this is a party with *mass support*, and that is what matters politically.

As for the contrast with the old reformist parties, this is a more legitimate point. Those older parties had an almost organic connection to the lives of generations of working class families, which was possible because of a social stability that is now gone forever. Parties like the Left Party are necessarily makeshift formations, thrown up by heterogeneous and disgruntled elements from the various labour bureaucracies. It may well be that the internal life of this party is as moribund as Schwarz claims (though he may also be exaggerating this aspect to serve his argument). But in any case the Left Party is never going to be a ‘classic’-style reformist party.

But this doesn’t mean that we can ignore this party and make no effort to reach its working class base of support simply because it doesn’t conform to previous models of reformist parties. Of course the revisionists groups that have sunk themselves inside the Left Party are functioning to bolster the party leadership, but that doesn’t mean that any intervention inside that party has to be unprincipled or opportunist. It is a tactical question on how best to conduct this work, *but to abstain from conducting any work also serves to bolster Lafontaine and Gysi, because it gives them free rein to maintain their hold on an important section of the working class.*

Not so, says Schwarz. There isn’t any need to make a political intervention among Left Party supporters because ... the Left Party doesn’t have many working class supporters! Its voters, writes Schwarz, “come predominantly from the middle class,” and he cites a study by a German think tank of Left Party electoral support to back up this claim.

In fact Schwarz seriously misrepresents the findings of that study. In the 1990s, the PDS (the successor of old East German Stalinist party that went on to become one of the two forerunners of the Left Party) did indeed receive much of its support from middle class layers and old-age pensioners. But in the last several years (the report goes up to 2007), the growth in Left Party support has been overwhelmingly from working class voters, mostly former supporters of the SPD.<sup>4</sup> While there are still middle class layers backing the party, its strongest base of support is from the unemployed, blue collar workers and apprentices. Indeed, the central finding of this study, reported in the summary, was that the Left Party drew its support *not only* from lower-income workers, which was to be expected, but that it also had substantial middle class support. Schwarz turns this finding upside down and claims instead that the Left Party is a middle class party with only negligible support in the working class!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially true in the western part of Germany, where the Left Party comes out of a breakaway faction of the SPD, led by former finance minister Oskar Lafontaine, as well as sections of the union bureaucracy.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Kroh and Thomas Siedler, 2008, “Die Anhänger der ‘Linken’: Rückhalt durch alle Einkommensschichten”, *DIW-Wochenbericht* 41, <http://www.diw.de/sixcms/detail.php/100834>

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Moreover, the growth of support for the Left Party in the working class was clearly evident in last month's federal election and state elections before that. Here, for instance, is an analysis of the federal election from the website of ARD, the German public broadcaster:

The Social Democrats suffered losses in all age and population groups, but its losses were especially dramatic in its traditional clientele –workers, union members and the younger generation. The Left Party particularly benefited from the terrible showing of the SPD: its increased vote came mainly from workers and the unemployed, and among the latter it is now the strongest force, ahead of the SPD.<sup>6</sup>

And while Schwarz may be hard-pressed to find workers in the Left Party, the mainstream media has no such difficulty. Here is a report from the BBC News website on the Left Party campaign a few days before the latest vote:

The Left's slogans certainly strike a chord with Wolfgang Echterhoff. On the outskirts of Bochum, he shows me the giant Nokia factory where he used to work. When the plant was relocated to Romania, Wolfgang was among 1,500 German workers who lost their jobs. "Lots of my old work colleagues and my drinking mates are now supporting the Left party," Mr Echterhoff says. "People are frightened that in Germany the gap between the rich and the poor is growing wider." ... At a Left party information stand in the centre of Bochum, former SPD supporter Brunhilde Michaelis hands out leaflets, posters and balloons to passers-by. She believes the Left party has become what the SPD used to be, and what it should be. "What does the SPD do for us people on the street? Nothing," Ms Michaelis complains. "They work together with the CDU. And the CDU has always been the party of the capitalists. The SPD loses its image. I think it's more the Left party – us – who are the real socialists."<sup>7</sup>

There are lots of other reports like this that can be cited. Of course the bourgeois media has its reasons for promoting the Left Party as a trustworthy safety valve for working class discontent. But the fact of that discontent – and its manifestation as Left Party support – also happen to be true. For a Trotskyist movement to turn its back on these workers by doing nothing to open up a dialogue with them – and even pretending they don't exist! – is an egregious dereliction of its revolutionary responsibilities.

A further point in this regard. It also happens to be the case that among the large group of workers abandoning the SPD, not all have gone to the Left Party. Thus, in the last election, the SPD lost 11 percent of its vote but the Left Party only gained 3 percent. While those numbers still represent thousands of workers who have shifted to the Left Party, clearly many more are abstaining.

The PSG sees this disparity between SPD losses and Left Party gains as a vindication of its position. Here, for instance, is a WWS report on the election results sounding what is a

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<sup>6</sup> "FDP im Höhenflug - SPD tief gestürzt," Tagesschau.de, <http://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/aktuell/wahlanalyse104.html>

<sup>7</sup> "German hard left set to gain ground," BBC News, Sept. 24, 2009: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8272658.stm>

recurring theme in PSG statements : “The Left Party was able to improve somewhat its result compared to 2005. In the course of the election campaign, the party made clear that it saw its principal role as foot soldier for the SPD. As a result, it was largely unable to benefit from the decline in support for the Social Democrats.”<sup>8</sup>

Now, if this is true, then the abstentions of many former SPD supporters really amount to a vote of no confidence in the Left Party because of its perceived role as a “foot soldier for the SPD.” To say the least, this would represent a remarkable development of class consciousness: it would mean that this ‘abstaining majority’ of ex-SPD supporters were actually *more to the left* than the Left Party. But what evidence does the PSG have for this claim? Surely the miniscule vote for the PSG itself does not bear this out. In fact there is no evidence because this claim is nothing more than wishful thinking. Just as with Schwarz’s claims that the Left Party isn’t a mass party and that it has little working class support, this is yet another example of turning reality on its head to make it conform to a completely misguided political perspective.

It doesn’t require a great deal of reflection to realize that the abstaining workers are probably *less politically conscious* than those backing the Left Party. Some of these workers may have become disgusted with politics generally, a frustration that often leads to political passivity. In other cases, the decision to abstain probably reflects *lingering illusions in the SPD* rather than some fanciful protest against the Left Party for not being left enough. Disappointed by the SPD’s right-wing course, especially its coalition with the CDU, these workers sat on their hands in this election, but they may still harbor hopes that in the future, perhaps with a new leader, the Social Democrats will have a change of heart.

By contrast, the workers who have shifted their vote to the Left Party have taken a small, but significant, step beyond this: their disappointment with the SPD has hardened into a conscious political repudiation of that party. They now see themselves as “the real socialists,” to cite one of the workers in the BBC News report. Of course that too is an illusion, but one that is pregnant with possibilities for fostering political consciousness. The more we can demonstrate to these workers (in a living way rather than just through denunciations on the WSWS) who “the real socialists” are, the wider the bridge we build for them to socialist consciousness.

*But it is precisely these more politically conscious workers aligned for now with the Left Party that the PSG is turning its back on.* Behind their spurious arguments rationalizing this position lies the absence of any serious perspective for building a revolutionary party in Germany. Blinded by an objectivist caricature of Marxism now prevalent within the ICFI, Schwarz and the other leaders of the PSG pay little attention to the problems of the development of working class consciousness. There is no pressing need to consider such problems because there is no need for the party to find a road to the masses. On the contrary, all the party needs to do is present a correct political program and the masses will make their way to the party. This is the classic – and fatal – illusion of every sectarian. And when reality fails to conform to this illusion, when the masses take a different path than the one preordained by the sectarian, then reality is simply rationalized away.

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<sup>8</sup> “Historic defeat for Social Democrats in German federal election,” WSWS, Sept. 28, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/sep2009/germ-s28.shtml>.

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This standpoint is evident in the part of Schwarz's article that deals with the PSG campaign in the European Union elections earlier this year. For context, I'll quote the remarks (from letter-writer F.S.) that Schwarz is responding to:

Why was the result of the PSG in the European election talked up? Isn't it rather obvious that the PSG did not attract much notice, at least from voters? Why can't such a bad result be taken as the occasion for a critical look at strategy? (With a two-thirds loss in relation to the last election, it was quite a disaster—particularly given that the PSG probably spent more this time than ever before.) I do not want to say that this election was somehow significant, but to try and derive something positive from the result seems to me wishful thinking.<sup>9</sup>

In passing, let me note that my article, "The PSG and the EU elections," makes very similar criticisms, and therefore it isn't unreasonable to suppose that this person was aware of that article.

Schwarz angrily rejects this criticism, saying that it "betrays a completely opportunist understanding of elections." The letter-writer is just interested in electoral success and in adapting to "whatever might find a resonance [i.e. with voters] at any given time." (Presumably this applies to me as well.) Schwarz is simply setting up a straw man here. In the quote I cited, the WSWS reader makes it quite clear s/he is not an electoral opportunist: "I do not want to say that this election was somehow significant." I made a similar qualification: "Now, it is true that Trotskyist parties are not electoralist machines and that votes are not the primary consideration determining our politics."

But the point I went on to make was that election results do have *some* significance, particularly as a reflection of the party's influence on – and therefore its political practice in – the working class. And I made that point on the authority of the PSG itself! In 2004, when its vote jumped to 26,000 in the EU election, the PSG was happy to broadcast its electoral success, proudly putting those numbers in a WSWS headline and then declaring that "this increase in votes is of considerable political significance." However, five years later, when its numbers dropped by more than half to under 10,000 votes, the PSG denies that this has any political significance insofar as the party's practice is concerned, and denounces any criticism to that effect as electoral opportunism. This is a case, as I noted, of wanting to have it both ways – of wanting to take credit for a good result but disavowing any responsibility for a bad one. Indeed, as the letter-writer F.S. notes, the PSG went even further, trying to 'talk up' what was obviously a terrible showing by blithely declaring that the election results "fully confirmed" its political perspectives.

This is why Schwarz resorts to setting up the straw man of electoral opportunism – so as to ignore the real gist of the criticism being made of the PSG. Against that straw man, Schwarz hammers away with truisms. The party's program, he declares:

...relies on an analysis of the objective situation and on the historical experiences of the international workers' movement. Our criterion is not this or that immediate success, in terms of votes, but the question: Is our programme

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<sup>9</sup> "The PSG and the German Left Party: An exchange of letters," WSWS, Sept. 28, 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/sep2009/left-s28.shtml>.

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correct? Does it correspond to the tasks that flow from the changes in the objective situation? Does it prepare the working class for the coming developments? Does it promote the workers' initiative and political independence? Does it articulate the historical interests of the working class?

All these rhetorical questions are just different ways of saying the same thing. And to be sure, a party needs a correct political program. *But is that all it needs?* This is the real crux of the matter, and one that Schwarz totally ignores. Of course it is easy enough to find quotes from Trotsky (as Schwarz does) stressing the need for a program that meets the objective needs of the working class. But Trotsky had much else to say on this subject. For instance there is his criticism of sectarianism, which I quoted in my article:

[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.<sup>10</sup>

It is as if these words were written with Schwarz in mind. Time and again, Schwarz insists on the need for a correct program, only to come “to a full stop” before the equally decisive question of *how to make the working accept that program*. And this isn't just a passing comment of Trotsky's; on the contrary, he comes back to this theme repeatedly, particularly in his valuable 1938 discussions on *The Transitional Program*.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the defining purpose of *The Transitional Program* was to address the problem of *how* to win the working class to revolutionary socialism. After all, Marxists have had a correct political program since *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and yet capitalism is still here.

To state what should be obvious, a revolutionary party needs to be judged not only by its program *but also by its practice*, specifically how it is intervening in the working class to make that program a reality. Of course election campaigns are only a part of this practice, and if the PSG were regularly intervening in the everyday struggles of the working class as a central part of its political work, then the poor showing in the EU election could be legitimately dismissed as a relatively minor setback.

But the fact is that the PSG (like other sections of the ICFI) carries out no sustained political work among any section of workers. This is a party whose principal activity is internet journalism, supplemented by occasional election campaigns. Thus, its poor electoral showing is actually an accurate reflection of the PSG's *estrangement from the working class*. That is why it is entirely right to conclude that this election result should be the occasion for the PSG to take, as F.S. puts it, a “critical look” at its practice. And what would become quickly evident in such an examination is that this estrangement from the working class is most crucially manifested in the PSG's sectarian hostility to politically engaging the working class supporters of the Left Party.

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International”, permanent-revolution.org: <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/2009/05/sectarianism-centrism-and-fourth.html>

<sup>11</sup> For more on these discussions of Trotsky's, of which Schwarz gives a one-sided impression, see my essay, “On the vulgar critique of vulgar materialism,” permanent-revolution.org, July 26, 2008: [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/vulgar\\_critique.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/vulgar_critique.pdf), pp. 11-14.

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A further point in this regard: Sectarians are often shocked and resentful when asked to account for their practice. We are a small organization, so their thinking goes, and thus it is unfair to keep pestering us about intervening in the working class or finding a road to the masses. All we can do is make propaganda for our program on the internet (or in occasional election campaigns), and it's up to the workers to come to us; if they don't, there's nothing more we can do. Of course nobody says this openly, that would be too obvious a political faux-pas, but you can definitely sense this mentality in the aggrieved tone of articles like Schwarz's.

Trotsky says somewhere that if you scratch a sectarian, you find a frightened opportunist, i.e. someone afraid to test their principles in mass struggles because this would expose their own underlying skepticism about those principles. In the case of the senior leaders of the PSG like Schwarz, these comrades have had to endure political isolation for decades, and so it is more likely that their sectarianism expresses a deep skepticism that Trotskyism can ever make a breakthrough in winning support among masses of workers. In this respect, the rhetoric of objectivism, which makes it seem that objective conditions (along with internet technology) will spontaneously create a mass audience for the party, is really the flip-side of political demoralization. The sad irony is now that objective conditions have finally opened up new possibilities for really creating such an audience in the working class, the party leadership is thoroughly hostile to the kind of political initiatives that can bring this about.

Schwarz makes two other points in defense of the PSG's result in the EU elections. The first of these is as follows:

Politically more important [in accounting for the PSG election results] was the fact that the growth of a revolutionary party is closely linked to the active intervention of the masses into political events. It wins influence if it is seen as a fighting party that is closely linked to the activity of the masses. The relatively good result for the PSG in the 2004 European election was closely connected with the mass protests at that time against the Hartz labour and welfare "reforms." These protests, which had developed independently of the established parties and trade unions, increased the self-confidence of many workers, who then supported the PSG in the election. In this year's European elections, social opposition expressed itself above all passively, in the form of abstention. This also affected the PSG's election result. Above all, it is the Left Party and the trade unions, which strangled all social protests, which bear responsibility for this.

It is certainly true, in a general sense, that the political fortunes of a revolutionary party are tied to the level of the class struggle as a whole. It is also true that a party "wins influence if it is seen as a fighting party that is closely linked to the activity of the masses." But here Schwarz baldly asserts something that isn't true at all – i.e. that German workers supposedly see the PSG as "a fighting party that is closely linked to the activity of the masses." Where is the evidence for this? There is, in fact, good evidence to the contrary, not only consistently poor showings in recent elections but also the party's estrangement, as mentioned earlier, from the everyday struggles of



workers. The unpleasant truth is that the PSG is having little, if any, impact on the political consciousness of even the most militant sections of the working class.<sup>12</sup>

But Schwarz makes use of his fictitious claim about the PSG to fashion what amounts to a political alibi. Since the party's growth is linked to the activity of the masses, the ups and downs of PSG voting results can easily be dismissed: in 2004, there was a good result because the masses were active; in 2009, the results were bad because the masses were passive. Of course Schwarz blames the passivity of the masses on the Left Party and the unions, but there is somebody else that is being implicitly blamed in this scenario – the masses themselves!

If their activity or passivity determines the growth of the party, what about the party's own activity – or lack of it: does this not have any bearing on whether the party grows? Isn't it far more reasonable to ascribe the poor showing in the election to the PSG's *own failure* to establish itself among militant workers as “a fighting party that is closely linked to the activity of the masses”? Blaming the Left Party and the unions is simply an evasion of this responsibility. So long as spontaneous consciousness dominates the working class, so long will bureaucrats of one kind or another dominate the workers' movement. It is the job of the revolutionary party to overcome these obstacles and find a road to the masses. Schwarz is just blaming the masses for not doing the work that only Marxists can do.

Schwarz also drags in some relatively obscure history to support his position. This concerns the so-called “Hottentot election” for the German Reichstag of 1907. The SPD had refused parliamentary approval of financing for German colonialist aggression in southwest Africa (present-day Namibia), which sparked an election and a furious campaign in the bourgeois press against the party. Because the SPD lost over half its parliamentary seats in the election, the right-wing in that party demanded opposition to imperialism be renounced. Schwarz tries to draw a link between this right-wing criticism of the SPD and the criticisms of the PSG's EU election campaign.

This comparison is far-fetched to the point of absurdity. Somehow we are supposed to believe that demanding that the PSG engage the working class supporters of the Left Party is similar to ... support for German imperialism! Moreover, the relationship to the working class of the SPD in 1907 was, to state the obvious, completely different than that of the PSG in 2009. Schwarz quotes Rosa Luxemburg's riposte to the party's right-wing: “We are a revolutionary mass party. Our political power lies, therefore, not in the number of our Reichstag seats, but in the number of our supporters among the people.” But the PSG is no mass revolutionary party, and its poor election result is entirely consistent with its real – that is to say, virtually negligible – standing in the working class. The most urgent task it faces is to win over the most politically conscious workers – the very same workers who have broken from the SPD and moved to the Left Party. Schwarz resorts to any historical precedent he can find, no matter how irrelevant, to avoid dealing with this plain truth.

But there are other, far more directly relevant historical precedents that Schwarz pointedly ignores. I am speaking here of what is known in the history of Trotskyism as the “French turn”,

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<sup>12</sup> As I noted in my previous article, even the relatively good result in the 2004 EU election was probably due more to random protest votes than to any impact the PSG was having on working class consciousness.

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when Trotskyist parties in France and America, under Trotsky's guidance, entered as factions inside the Socialist parties in those countries in the mid-1930s. This entry work was an important success, resulting eventually in the recruitment of a substantial layer of workers, students and youth to the revolutionary movement. But initially it precipitated a crisis within the Trotskyist movement, with several sectarian factions opposing entry in the Socialist parties on the grounds that this was caving in to opportunism. Trotsky was scathing in his criticism of these sectarians. I have already quoted from one of his essays on the subject, which we have posted on our web site.<sup>13</sup> Here is another quote, this time the opening points from an internal document of the French Trotskyist party from July 1934, with Trotsky responding to objections to entry work in the Socialist Party:

1. It is not enough for revolutionists to have correct ideas. Let us not forget that correct ideas have already been set down in *Capital* and in *The Communist Manifesto*. But that has not prevented false ideas from being broadcast. It is the task of the revolutionary party to weld together the correct ideas with the mass labor movement. Only in this manner can an idea become a driving force.

2. A revolutionary organization does not mean a paper and its readers. One can write and read revolutionary articles day in and day out and still remain in reality outside of the revolutionary movement. One can give the labor organizations good advice – from the sidelines. That is something. But that still does not make a revolutionary organization.

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6. In relation to the Socialist Party, the League [the Communist League was the French Trotskyist organization] has shown not only insufficient initiative but also a hidebound sectarianism. Instead of taking for its task the creation of a faction inside the SFIO [the Socialist Party of France] just as soon as the crisis in the latter became obvious, the League demanded that every Socialist become convinced of the correctness of our ideas and leave his mass organization to join the group of *La Verite* [French Trotskyist journal] readers. In order to create an internal faction, it was necessary to pursue the mass movement, to adapt oneself to the environment, to carry on menial daily work. Precisely in this very decisive field the League has not been able to make any progress up to the present – with very few exceptions. A great deal of valuable time was allowed to be lost ...

7. The criticism, the ideas, the slogans of the League are in general correct, but in this present period particularly inadequate. The revolutionary ideas must be transformed into life itself every day through the experience of the masses themselves. But how can the League explain this to them when it is itself cut off from the experience of the masses? It is necessary to add: several comrades do not even see the need for this experience. It seems to them to be sufficient to form an opinion on the basis of newspaper accounts they read and then to give it expression in an article or a talk. Yet if the most correct ideas do not reflect

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<sup>13</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International", permanent-revolution.org: <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/2009/05/sectarianism-centrism-and-fourth.html>

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directly the ideas and actions of the masses, they will escape the attention of the masses altogether.<sup>14</sup>

I have quoted these remarks at some length because it is almost uncanny how precisely Trotsky anticipated the misguided outlook and abstentionist practices that prevail within the present-day ICFI. Correct ideas are not enough ... A revolutionary organization is more than just its paper (or website) and its readers ... you have to “pursue the mass movement,” adapt to its environment and not simply issue demands that workers leave their mass organizations and join the party ... It isn’t enough “to form an opinion on the basis of newspaper accounts ... and then give it expression in an article or talk” ... What is decisive is to bring revolutionary ideas to life “every day through the experience of the masses themselves.” It is no exaggeration to say that all of this could have been written yesterday instead of three quarters of a century ago.

Of course no analogy fits exactly, much has changed in the world since the 1930s, including the overall state of the labor movement, and so the kinds of tactics needed to engage the working class supporters of a reformist party may be different today than back then. Nevertheless, what hasn’t changed – and what these remarks speak to with an enduring relevance that is remarkable – is the need for Trotskyists to “pursue the mass movement.” Schwarz et al. are well aware of this history but they choose to ignore it for the simple reason that they have now gone over to the sectarian positions that Trotsky was fighting against.

I have now written two commentaries on the PSG, not because I think this party is any worse than the other sections of the ICFI, but rather because I think the political situation in Germany is in some respects a harbinger of what is to come in other countries. By this I mean that the economic convulsions of global capitalism have produced the beginnings of a conscious political radicalization in the German working class. Of course it is impossible to predict how these still very tentative beginnings will unfold, but for now at least German political life opens up possibilities for revolutionary intervention in the working class as yet unavailable elsewhere.

For that reason, the political problems of the ICFI manifest themselves more acutely in the work of the PSG than in other sections. And what we find is that the long period of theoretical and political ossification of the ICFI (which Alex Steiner and I analyzed at length in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*<sup>15</sup>) has given rise in the movement to an almost visceral repugnance in reaction to this emerging radicalization. If this is happening in Germany, it will happen in other sections eventually as well. Without a sharp reorientation of the movement to free itself from the deadweight of sectarianism and objectivism, all these parties will turn out to be good for nothing when it comes to meeting the needs of the working class for revolutionary leadership.

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<sup>14</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The League Faced with a Turn”, July 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934-35*, pp. 33-4.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch01.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf)