

The PSG and the 2011 Berlin state elections

By Daniel Müller

In the Berlin State elections on September 18th the PSG (*Partei für soziale Gleichheit*, German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International) got 0.1 % of the total votes cast or 1687 in absolute numbers. The WSWS (World Socialist Web Site) [presents this result](#)¹ as evidence for their successful party work and a significant step towards social revolution. PSG leader Ulrich Rippert was reported to say,

We have made a major step forward with this campaign... We campaigned as a self-confident, revolutionary alternative and met with great interest on the part of workers and youth, not only in this city, but internationally.

I have some doubts on this matter.

First, in both absolute and relative numbers this result is still abysmal. The WSWS insists that the PSG tripled their results compared to the last Berlin State elections in 2006 when they got 565 votes, but this is more a confirmation of how bad their last result was. It is further worth pointing out that in the European parliament elections in 2004 they got 1404 votes in Berlin, and in the German federal parliament elections in 2009 they received 1420 votes. These results are not far behind this year's number, so this is hardly a great improvement. Their [2004 statement](#)² on the result is in large part very similar to the current one, another indication of a stand still. At that time, the PSG reporter wrote,

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.

The significance attached to the vote in 2011 is thus eerily reminiscent of the significance attached to the vote in 2004 as if both articles were created from the same template.

The final result in the 2011 election is not so impressive when compared to the effort they put into their campaign: 200,000 leaflets have been distributed and 100 information tables built. More importantly, consider how the circumstances changed, yet the changed circumstances failed to produce significant increases in votes³. We are now a full three

1 <http://wsws.org/articles/2011/sep2011/berl-s20.shtml>

2 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/germ-j16.shtml>

3 I will only consider the absolute increase; it is nonsense to talk of a threefold increase when the absolute number is so tiny. Anyone with an elementary understanding of statistics knows that such small changes

years into the crisis with no end in sight, the EU disintegrating, cuts in social spending and austerity measures without precedent, mass protests and riots - although I must concede that in Germany the crisis did not spark any large activity in the working class yet. Nonetheless a change in attitude towards the state and politics has definitely happened, above all a further loss in confidence in the state and the socio-economic situation.

In the light of these events, the election result hardly indicates a major shift in the number of workers looking to the PSG for leadership.

Most telling in the commentary on the 2011 election is the last paragraph, citing Ulrich Rippert.

At the same time, he [Rippert] added, it could be noted that while workers expressed interest in our program and grappled with our international perspectives, many still shy away from drawing revolutionary conclusions and making the step of positively engaging in the work and activities of the PSG. "A great many people are now watching us and following what we have to say," Rippert said, "They will actively turn towards us to the extent that class struggles openly develop in Germany."

It is not clear to whom he is referring when talking about "a great many people" who showed interest, but did not yet take the step to become full blown revolutionaries (i.e. PSG members) and take part in PSG activities (presumably listening to lectures and writing articles), nor even voting for the PSG⁴.

But even if this is not just wishful thinking and we accept Rippert's assertion at face value, it indicates that the PSG cannot build a connection even with the most sympathetic workers. As far as Rippert is concerned, history will solve this problem for them:

They will actively turn towards us to the extent that class struggles openly develop in Germany.

It seems as if there is nothing that needs to be done, just keep on doing the party work (i.e. writing articles for the WSWS), and someday the working class will come knocking at the party office door, asking for leadership. I am afraid things might not turn out that way.

are insignificant and any conclusions about trends based on such numbers are highly speculative at best.

⁴ The English translation of the article omits the vote. The original German text is more like "many still shy away from ... engaging in the work of the PSG or from voting for the PSG.."

Another observation: The ICFI is very confident that their self-professed mastery of Marxist theory gives them a much more profound understanding of world events than most conventional media outlets because the latter lack a coherent theory and rely mostly on day to day impressions. Yet an examination of the WSWS shows that the great majority of articles published on that web site rely on the same day to day impressions that are the stock in trade of bourgeois journalism. And even for the small percentage of articles analyzing economic and political developments that are of a more serious nature, there is little in them that provide any clue as to what the working class should do in any particular situation. And when PSG journalists are reporting on the PSG itself, one can say that they are incapable of providing an honest reckoning of events but instead fall into an orgy of wishful thinking. One would expect more even from a bourgeois journalist. In the series “Marxism without its Head or its Heart”, Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner demonstrated that “analysis” based on wishful thinking is nothing new in the WSWS.⁵

When it comes to reporting about themselves nothing is left over of critical thought and profound insight; all that matters are any impressions that might suggest an increased political significance of the party in the working class. No argument is too outlandish to be made use of. For instance, the article reporting on their 2004 election results dedicates more than three paragraphs to the fact that the result of the PSG was close to the result of the Stalinist DKP. It states

These numbers have a special significance. For decades, Stalinism was able to utilize large party apparatuses and enormous financial resources, underwritten by the Kremlin, to hold down the genuine representatives of revolutionary socialism. With the ignominious collapse of East Germany and the decline of the SPD, this period has ended. In relation to the total size of the electorate, the vote for the PSG remains small. Nevertheless, this latest election result reflects an unmistakable political trend that is still in its early stages: a turn by tens of thousands of politically conscious people toward a socialist alternative.

Seven years into this “unmistakable trend” the PSG has more or less the same result, while the DKP scored 3614 votes in Berlin, more than twice as much as the PSG received in 2011. The WSWS does not write one word about the DKP results in 2011. This is a good example how some meaningless events get exaggerated into “unmistakable trends”. The PSG discounts all accountability when it turns out they were wrong.

In summing up their conclusions about the WSWS coverage of the New York transit strike of 2005, Steiner and Brenner wrote,

There is nothing worse than a revolutionary leader who tries to obscure problems with empty rhetoric and wishful thinking.⁶

5 See their discussion of the WSWS’s coverage of the New York City transit strike of 2005: http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf, pages 120-127.

6 http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf, page 127.

We can say exactly the same thing about the leadership of the PSG in 2011. They have learned nothing more from the PSG's 2011 election campaign than they did from the 2009 campaign for EU elections or from the 2004 elections. We see the same cherry picking of data in order to hide the obvious fact that the PSG has little connection with the working class.

The PSG, the Left Party and the Pirate Party

Frank Brenner, [commenting on the PSG's performance in the 2009 EU parliament elections](#)⁷ noted that the PSG has a sectarian attitude: meaning that it is only capable of denouncing other parties, but makes no effort to win over the workers who support those parties. For instance, when commenting on the Left Party in that election the WSWS wrote that “workers, the unemployed and those dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments are increasingly dismissive of this party” despite the fact that the Left Party made some small gains in that election. This time around the Left Party lost some votes, so the explanation that workers are disappointed with this party has more credibility. Yet whatever the ups and down in the fortunes of the Left Party, Brenner's more important point was that despite the disaffection of workers with the Left Party, the PSG is incapable of winning the support of those workers. He wrote:

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. [...] 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.

There is good evidence that disaffection with the Left Party has resulted, not in a turn toward the PSG, but, as Brenner predicted, in the emergence of another “left” formation on the political landscape. The newly surfaced Pirate Party seems to have absorbed some of the working class votes that had previously gone to the Left Party.⁸ And judging from

7 http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG_elections.pdf

8 According to a voter survey the Pirates picked up votes from all the major left-of-center parties, most especially the Green Party, but also from the SPD and the Left Party.

“The survey group Infratest established that 17,000 former Green Party supporters switched their votes to the Pirate Party on Sunday, more than came from any other party. The SPD lost 14,000 voters to the Pirates and the far-left Left Party 13,000. The party's largest coup, however, came from its ability to attract fully 23,000 people to the polls who had never voted before. More votes came from former East Berlin, where the party secured 10.1 percent of the vote, than from former West Berlin.”

Quoted from *Der Spiegel*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,787417,00.html>

the crude denunciations against the Pirate Party, the PSG commentators can neither admit that this is the case nor grasp the situation accurately.

It is necessary to say a few words about this new party. It is a somewhat amorphous grouping, having no clear manifesto or exact boundaries, but its fundamental physiognomy is clear enough. The Pirate Party started as a political arm of young technophiles which organized themselves mostly over the internet. They consider themselves essentially as internationalists as they reject national boundaries as relicts from the past that have been overcome by technological developments. Nevertheless their main base of support is in western European countries, most notably in Sweden and Germany. They have connections with internet activists and hacking groups like “The Pirate Bay”, “Electronic Frontier Foundation”, the German “Chaos Computer Club” and probably the “Anonymous” internet activist collective.

One of their central concerns is the free exchange of information and knowledge. According to these people it would be a great benefit for society if all kind of software or digital media (like music, movies, electronic books and articles) were allowed to be exchanged freely over the internet. They see this aim as endangered by software and media companies, who make profit from copying and distributing information, and governments who would like to control the flows of information in order to keep maintain control over the information available to the general population. One can well include Wikileaks and its founder Julien Assange in this milieu⁹. Assange has been praised many times by the WSWS for his role in revealing secret diplomatic cables of the US government.

As for the Pirate's political outlook, it is somewhat eclectic and changing, not untypical of a makeshift formation. They had some very radical demands in the beginning, like the complete legalization of copying software and media over the internet. This is essentially an anti capitalist demand that would put some giant companies (e.g. Microsoft, Oracle, Apple, Time Warner, Disney) into big trouble if realized. Were it presented in the context of a political struggle for socialism it could even be considered a good transitional demand in the sense of Trotsky's Transitional Program. Of course, the Pirates are no socialist organization, nor do they claim otherwise. They have a great deal of internal debate on social or economic issues. There are some in the Pirate Party who raise left reformist demands like the introduction of a basic income guaranteed by the state. But here we can see the strong influence of middle class views, as many members of the Pirates are better-off professionals rather than workers. Hence there is strong internal opposition against such demands. One may even find outright hostility against the

⁹ In fact there is even a personal connection between Wikileaks and the German Pirate Party, as the latter nominated Anke Domscheit-Berg as a candidate for the council of Berlin quarter Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, the Pirate's central stronghold. Anke Domscheit-Berg is in turn the wife of Daniel Domscheit-Berg, a central Wikileaks activist until his split with Julien Assange in 2010.

working class, as some regard the working class and those not familiar with modern computer technology as an unproductive relic from the past and a dead weight on progress in the future.

It is therefore correct to warn workers and young people about the Pirates and their illusions that reformism can be reanimated by computer technology, about their political naivety and limitations, all of which pose the danger of a right wing trajectory in the future. But instead of a serious examination of this political formation all we get from the WSWS is a crude and one-sided analysis of the Pirates, describing them as lacking a genuine program, as being anti-social and even labeling them as an outright right wing formation.

The WSWS explains away the success of the Pirate Party as the result of media hype. Actually there is an obvious inconsistency in this analysis: on the one hand the WSWS acknowledges the big change in German political life expressed in the emergence of the Pirate Party; on the other hand they maintain that no major reorientation of young people is taking place. Thus WSWS reporter Christophe Dreier, after examining the post-election surveys writes,

All these figures prove that the Pirates' electoral success was not based on a substantial re-orientation of the younger generation, but on the dissatisfaction of all age groups with the SPD-Left Party Senate and all the established parties.¹⁰

Granted there is a great deal of confusion shown in the turn to the Pirate Party, but one would think that a mass disaffection of voters on this scale still counts as a "reorientation" of the body politic, however confused. The same author continues this exercise in tortured logic by theorizing that the electoral success of the Pirate Party was not even a genuine sign of disaffection with the major parties but was instead the product of a conspiracy by the media.

The Pirates' ability to mobilise a certain amount of protest in Berlin is the result of neither a broad base of support from young people, nor the focus of the policies they advocate. It is rather the product of an elaborate public relations campaign and extensive media hype.

Like much else in the WSWS commentary on the 2011 elections this is a gross oversimplification of what happened. To be sure there was a certain amount of media hype about the Pirate Party but it is arguable whether the media hype was the cause of the success of the Pirates or a natural byproduct of that success. Initially there was hardly any media coverage of the Pirate Party. That was the situation for a number of years. That began to change only recently when some opinion polls indicated they had a real chance to enter the Berlin Parliament. More importantly, the media coverage by itself could hardly account for the dramatic shift in voting patterns had not the Pirates tapped into a vein of discontent with the traditional parties with their liberal and sometimes radical slogans. Young workers in particular, facing insecure future job prospects, have responded to this.¹¹

10 <http://wsws.org/articles/2011/sep2011/pira-s26.shtml>

11 This was confirmed by voter surveys following the election. See the previously cited article in *Der*

The election results in Berlin are indicative, not only of the disaffection with the anti-working class policies of the SPD and the Left party; *they are also indicative of **the total ineffectiveness** of the PSG to tap into that disaffection and develop it into socialist consciousness.* This is why there is an underlying dishonesty in the PSG's analysis of the Pirates. What is left out of this analysis – and indeed of the entire perspective of the PSG – is a critical examination of its own political practice. Ascribing the Pirate party vote solely to media hype is a convenient way for the PSG to let itself off the hook. If the PSG is waiting for a time when the media will not be an obstacle to the propagation of revolutionary consciousness, then we will have to put off the socialist revolution forever.

The Berlin election results are yet another indication of the political impasse that the sectarian politics of the International Committee have led to.