

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part one

29 September 2010

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held its Founding Congress May 22-24, 2010 in Berlin. The Congress adopted the document “The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit” on May 23.

We are publishing the document in serialized form. Below is the first of eleven parts.

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I. Programme and history

1. The perspective of a party is determined, to a considerable degree, by its attitude to historical questions. Nowhere is this more clear than in Germany. Here the workers’ movement achieved triumphant successes and suffered world-historical defeats, which shaped the character of the entire 20th century. In Germany, Marxism was founded; it was here that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) developed as the first Marxist mass party; and it was here that opportunism (the capitulation of the SPD on the eve of the First World War) and Stalinism (the failure of the German Communist Party to prevent Hitler’s seizure of power) were to blame for terrible catastrophes. After the Second World War, the division of the country and the abuse of Marxism by the regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) left a heritage of great political confusion.

2. “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”, wrote Marx in 1852. 1 Nightmares are unleashed by undigested traumatic experiences. In order to overcome them, these experiences must be consciously worked through. In a general sense, this is also true for politics. Without consciously working through the lessons of the 20th century, one cannot find one’s way in the 21st. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) bases its programme and its perspective on an understanding of the historical experiences of the international socialist movement. It relies thereby on the heritage of the Fourth International and its struggles against Stalinism, reformism and Pabloite revisionism. The purpose of this document is to elaborate these experiences.

3. The deepest financial and economic crisis since the 1930s is today throwing up all the unresolved questions of the past. The capitalist world system is suffering from the same irresolvable contradictions that have brought forth two world wars, numerous regional military conflicts, fascism and other brutal dictatorships—the incompatibility of the world economy and the nation state, and the contradiction between private property and social production. There is no way out of this crisis on a capitalist basis. As in the last century, it poses before mankind the alternative: socialism or barbarism.

4. At the heart of the crisis is the decline of the US, whose economic power in 1945—after two world wars and a hundred million killed—provided the foundation for a new capitalist upturn. For a

considerable time, the US has been compensating for the loss of its economic hegemony by means of its military supremacy and by expanding the financial sector at the expense of industrial production. This is the background to the current crisis, which cannot be resolved peacefully. The American ruling class is just as little ready to voluntarily give up its power and wealth as every other ruling class in history. Its efforts to shift the costs of the crisis onto the working class and onto its international rivals, and the reaction of its rivals in Europe and Asia, are giving rise to violent class battles and international conflicts.

5. The global development of the productive forces has not only deepened the crisis of capitalism, it has also strengthened the social power of the working class and created the objective conditions for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a socialist society. Innovative developments in information and communications technology have led to the integration of the world economy on a scale that has never been seen before, linking together the working class across continents and strengthening its numbers. Never before has such a high percentage of mankind lived in cities and been so directly integrated into the global production process. Countries such as China, which were still predominantly rural just one hundred years ago, today rank among the most important industrial regions of the world. The PSG poses to itself the task of preparing the working class politically and theoretically for the coming class battles and of arming it with a socialist programme, which is built on the lessons of previous struggles. The PSG is the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was founded by Trotsky in 1938 as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

II. The SPD as a Marxist mass party

6. Four decades after Marx and Engels published the Communist Manifesto and based socialism on a scientific foundation, German social democracy developed, under the influence of Marxism, into the world’s first mass party of the working class. The SPD carried out pioneering historical work, whose results would have a lasting effect for many decades, even after the party had long turned away from Marxism. It formed the working class into a politically conscious class and developed within it a broad, socialist culture embracing all areas of life. Both the communist parties and the Fourth International rested on this early work of the SPD.

7. The necessity for an independent workers’ party resulted from the defeat of the democratic revolution of 1848, which revealed the irreconcilable contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and the political impotence of the democratic petty bourgeoisie. The bourgeois-democratic revolution was delayed in Germany, because the existing petty states, which continued into the 19th century, held back the development of trade and industry. When the revolution finally broke out in 1848, the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was

already so deep that a common struggle against Prussian absolutism was no longer possible. In particular, after the first great battle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, which flared up in July 1848 in Paris, the liberal bourgeoisie feared the revolution's threat to its property far more than its lack of rights under Prussian rule and stabbed the revolution in the back. The democratic petty bourgeoisie—the mass of the nation consisting of craftsmen, merchants and farmers—proved unable to play an independent political role and failed pitifully. The first freely elected national assembly, which met in the Frankfurt Paulskirche, was, in the words of Engels, “from the first day of its existence, more frightened of the least popular movement than of all the reactionary plots of all the German Governments put together.” 2

8. In their analysis of the 1848 revolution, Marx and Engels stressed that the working class had to organize itself independently of the democratic wing of the bourgeoisie. Even under conditions, where “the democratic petty bourgeois are everywhere oppressed”, where they “preach to the proletariat general unity and reconciliation” and “seek to found a great opposition party”, unity with them must “be resisted in the most decisive manner”, they wrote. The democratic petty bourgeoisie “seek to ensnare the workers in a party organization in which general social-democratic phrases prevail while their particular interests are kept hidden behind, and in which, for the sake of preserving the peace, the specific demands of the proletariat may not be presented. Such a unity would be to their advantage alone and to the complete disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose all its hard-won independent positions and be reduced once more to a mere appendage of official bourgeois democracy.” They called for an independent organisation of the workers' party, “in which the position and interests of the proletariat can be discussed free from bourgeois influence.” 3

9. In a further passage, on which Leon Trotsky would later base himself in the elaboration of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, Marx and Engels explained: “While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far—not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world—that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one.” 4

10. The defeat of the 1848 revolution temporarily pushed the working class into the background. State suppression, which culminated in the 1852 Communist Trial in Cologne, obstructed its political organization. The years of political reaction were, however, marked by the advance of the industrial revolution and the rapid growth of the working class. Banking, industry, mining, the railways, shipping and foreign trade experienced an enormous upturn. In the 1860s, the General German Workers' Association (ADAV) of Ferdinand Lassalle and the Federation of German Workers Associations (VDAV) of August Bebel developed as independent political workers' organizations. They united in 1875 to form the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (SAP), which was renamed in 1890 as the SPD.

11. Inside the SAP, Marxism began its advance. Bebel's faction, which was identified with Marxism, increasingly gained authority. Although the party was banned between 1878 and 1890 under Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws, was politically persecuted and legally only able to contest national and state elections, it developed into a powerful social force. Its electoral successes and a mass strike, which shook Germany in 1889-90, finally led to Bismarck's resignation and to the rescinding of the

Anti-Socialist Laws. Now the SPD became the largest party in Germany. It educated the working class in Marxism and for hundreds of thousands of workers became the centre of their lives. At the high point of its power, it published more than 70 daily papers and numerous weekly publications, which were read by 6 million people. Its publishing houses produced books in large print runs on history, politics and culture. It had its own party school and 1,100 libraries. It coordinated an enormous network of leisure activities from gymnastics to choirs.

12. The SPD not only defended the social interests of workers, it was also the only party in Germany that consistently fought for democratic rights and sharply opposed anti-Semitism. The petty bourgeoisie and bourgeois intelligentsia, which had stabbed the 1848 democratic revolution in the back, lined up in its majority behind Bismarck and the Wilhelminian state, after the unification of the empire through “blood and iron”. In contrast to England, France and the United States, there is no bourgeois democratic tradition in Germany. From the outset, the struggle for democratic rights was inseparably connected with the workers' movement. The working class confronted a powerful, hostile state. The mere fight for social rights presupposed the struggle for political rights. That is why in Germany, the establishment of a workers' party preceded the building of the trade unions. Influential trade unions only developed afterwards, as an initiative of the SPD and under its leadership.

III. The growth of opportunism in the SPD

13. The SPD was never a homogeneous party. The unification conference in 1875 in Gotha made numerous concessions to the supporters of Ferdinand Lassalle, who had died in 1864. Marx sharply criticised the Gotha programme, which he accused of being “tainted through and through by the Lassallean sect's servile belief in the state”. Lassalle had wanted to establish socialism with the help of the Prussian state, which he regarded as an institution standing above the classes. He had even met secretly with Bismarck, in order to exploit the latter's conflicts with the bourgeoisie in the interests of the working class. Lassalle justified this opportunist “alliance with absolutist and feudal opponents against the bourgeoisie” (Marx) by saying that in relation to the working class, “all other classes are only one reactionary mass”. This ultra-left cliché blurred the difference between the democratic petty bourgeoisie, the liberal bourgeoisie and feudal reaction. It was also reproduced in the Gotha programme and was angrily rejected by Marx. 5

14. After Gotha, Lassalle's supporters were increasingly on the defensive and Marxism was successfully established as the official party doctrine. But after the abolition of the Anti-Socialist Laws, Lassalle's perspective—of establishing a kind of national socialism under the wing of Prussian despotism—received new support. In June 1891, the Bavarian Social Democrat Georg von Vollmar delivered two speeches in Munich's Eldorado Palace, which received much attention. Vollmar called on the party to abandon its past slogans, and become a practically-oriented democratic reformist movement. The party was best served by striving “for economic and political improvements on the basis of the present state and social order”, he said. He expressly opposed the internationalism of the SPD. Whoever was not a dreamer had to recognize that “differences of nationality and community are deeply rooted”. He warned against “a paradoxical denial of a legitimate, healthy national life and the obligations arising therefrom also for us”. He praised the tripartite alliance, the imperialist alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy, as serving the interests of peace, and threatened that any power breaking the peace through an attack on German soil would confront the armed force of the German working class. 6

15. Vollmar's Eldorado speeches became the manifesto of the revisionism that was corroborated theoretically by Eduard Bernstein seven years later in his book *The Preconditions of Socialism*. Bernstein claimed that the development of capitalism had disproved Marx's

economic analysis, and lampooned as “socialist catastrophitis” his prognosis that, due to its internal contradictions, capitalism would confront a fundamental crisis. Capitalism had developed “means of adaptation” that allowed it to dampen and overcome its periodic crises. Socialism was not a historical necessity, but was the end result of gradual reforms within the context of bourgeois society. It was not the result of the class struggle, but the product of moral and humanist principles founded on Kant’s categorical imperative.

16. In this way, Bernstein rejected the socialist perspective itself. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out in her reply to Bernstein, the rejection of the Marxist theory of capitalist crisis leads inevitably to the abandonment of socialism. Luxemburg wrote, either the socialist transformation flows from the objective contradictions of the capitalist order or “the ‘means of adaptation’ will really stop the collapse of the capitalist system and thereby enable capitalism to maintain itself by suppressing its own contradictions. In that case socialism ceases to be an historic necessity. It then becomes anything you want to call it, but it is no longer the result of the material development of society.” If Bernstein was correct regarding the course of capitalist development, then “the socialist transformation of society is only a utopia”. 7

IV. The collapse of the Second International

17. Although Bernstein’s theses were regularly rejected at party congresses, in practice they won increasing support. After the turn of the century, instances in which the SPD leadership, or sections of it, adopted right-wing positions on important political questions or avoided putting a clear position, increased. A profound gulf opened up in the party between the two extremes, represented on the left by Rosa Luxemburg and on the right by the leaders of the trade unions. The latter regarded the party’s revolutionary theory as a hindrance to their organisational successes and painstakingly acquired social concessions. The writings of Rosa Luxemburg, who vehemently fought against the growth of opportunism, read like a chronology of the gradual right-wing development of the SPD.

18. When the Russian revolution of 1905 threw up the question of a political mass strike, the trade unions rejected such a tactic with the words: “A general strike is general nonsense” and agitated against Luxemburg, who argued in favour of the mass strike. The trade union congress held in Cologne in 1905 took place under the slogan “The trade unions need peace and quiet above all” and condemned even discussion over the mass strike as playing with fire. The trade union leaders “were fearful of losing their tactical independence from the party, they feared that their well-filled coffers would be plundered, and they even feared the destruction of their organisations by the government as a result of such a confrontation. In addition they were completely opposed to ‘experiments’ which could disturb their very ingenious system of daily skirmishing with employers.” 8 Further conflicts flared up over the support for the state budget by social democratic deputies in southern Germany and the SPD’s adaptation to German imperialism, as expressed in the party’s stance towards German colonial policy and its passive reaction to Germany’s massive build-up of arms.

19. As the First World War approached, the party leadership of August Bebel and Karl Kautsky increasingly distanced themselves from Luxemburg and sought to avoid any conflict with the trade union leaders. When the war finally broke out the opportunists had control over the party. They had failed to anticipate what Trotsky described as “the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions” 9 and capitulated to German imperialism. Whereas before, at international congresses, the SPD had promised opposition to war and sworn its loyalty to international solidarity, it now called for the defence of the fatherland and regarded socialism as an issue for the distant future. In the Reichstag (national parliament), the SPD voted for war credits and placed its entire apparatus in the service of

imperialist war propaganda.

20. All the other social democratic parties—apart from the Serbian party and the Russian Bolsheviks—also called for a defence of the fatherland. This sealed the fate of the Second International. Its transition to the camp of the ruling class was complete and irrevocable. At the end of the war, as revolutionary struggles flared up, the social democratic parties defended the bourgeois order with all available means. In Germany, the SPD had rebellious workers shot. It allied itself with the high command of the army in order to suppress the revolution and to murder its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The social democrats main organ *Vorwärts* promoted the Freikorps, the murderous paramilitary gangs from which Hitler was later to recruit his Sturmabteilung (SA). At a later date, when the Weimar Republic was gripped by crisis, the SPD supported Brüning’s emergency decrees, elected Hindenburg as Reich president and so helped to clear the way for Hitler to come to power.

21. This historical betrayal, whose consequences would determine the future development of the 20th century, had objective roots in the historical conditions of the preceding epoch. The ascent of the SPD had occurred against the background of a long drawn out phase of capitalist expansion. While the party marched under the banner of Marxism theoretically, its practice was completely bound up with workers’ daily needs and the development of its own forces—the recruitment of new members, the filling of the party coffers and the development of its press. Although revisionism had lost out in the theoretical struggle, it lived on in the party and was nourished by its practice and psychology. “The critical refutation of Revisionism as a theory by no means signified its defeat tactically and psychologically,” Trotsky wrote, and continued: “The parliamentarians, the unionists, the members of cooperatives continued to live and to work in the atmosphere of general opportunism, of practical specializing and of nationalistic narrowness.” 10

22. The catastrophe of 1914 was not, however, inevitable. The objective situation prior to the outbreak of war not only gave rise to opportunism, but also encouraged the emergence of revolutionary tendencies in the Second International and the working class as a whole. Revolutionary Marxists such as Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg had a much deeper understanding of the contradictions of imperialism than opportunists such as Bernstein, who were blinded by their superficial impressions of the economic upturn and trade union successes. The Marxists prepared the working class for the coming upheavals by undertaking a systematic struggle against opportunism. Nobody understood this better than Lenin, who unyieldingly fought opportunism on a theoretical, political and organizational level, and who had already broken with the Russian opportunists, the Mensheviks, in 1903. Lenin developed Marxism in a constant struggle against the political and ideological pressure of bourgeois and petty bourgeois tendencies. He regarded the conflict between rival currents not as a subjectively motivated struggle for influence, but as an objective manifestation of real shifts in class relations—both between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and also between different strata within the working class itself. This prepared the Bolsheviks for the war and the revolutionary developments that followed.

23. The Bolsheviks not only opposed the defenders of the fatherland, but also the pacifists, who limited their slogans to calls for peace. Lenin called for the imperialist war to be transformed into a civil war, i.e., he linked the fight against the war with preparation for the socialist revolution. In 1917 this perspective was confirmed in Russia. The February revolution brought the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries to power. They continued the war in the interests of the Russian bourgeoisie and its imperialist allies and came into sharp conflict with the desire for peace on the part of the workers, peasants and soldiers, who turned to the Bolsheviks. In October, the Bolsheviks organized an uprising, which brought down the provisional government and placed power in the hands of the Soviets. The Soviet government immediately

ended the war and published the secret treaties detailing the imperialists' war aims.

24. The victory of the October revolution marked a historical turning point. In Russia, for the first time in history, the working class, under Marxist leadership, took power and preserved it. Notwithstanding its later degeneration, the October revolution testified to the capacity of the working class to overthrow the capitalist order and to lay the foundations for a higher, more progressive society. It became the stimulus for revolutionary uprisings throughout the world. The barbarian character of the war, indignation with the betrayal of the social democracy and the consequences of the economic crisis radicalised broad sections of workers. They oriented towards the revolutionary Marxists, who had placed themselves, from the very outset, against the war. In March 1919 in Moscow, the founding congress of the Communist International took place. The Comintern insisted that there was no place for centrist and opportunist elements in its ranks, and developed the programme, the strategy and the tactics of the world socialist revolution as a practical task of the international working class.

25. The First World War and the October revolution marked the beginning of a new historical epoch, the epoch of the death agony of capitalism and the world socialist revolution. The following three decades were marked by a continuous series of bitter class struggles and military conflicts. This called for a different kind of party than had been developed by the Second International. It was no longer possible to proclaim theoretical support for a maximum programme, for internationalism and for the revolution, while the party's daily practice remained limited to organizational routine and to a minimum programme of reforms within the national framework. The new parties had to be able to react rapidly to social changes, to subordinate their tactics to revolutionary strategy, to act in a disciplined way and to conduct an irreconcilable struggle against opportunism.

26. Trotsky later summarized the difference between the parties of the Second and the Third internationals with the words: "In a period of growing capitalism even the best party leadership could do no more than only accelerate the formation of a workers' party. Inversely, mistakes of the leadership could retard this process. The objective prerequisites of a proletarian revolution matured but slowly, and the work of the party retained a preparatory character. Today, on the contrary, every new sharp change in the political situation to the left places the decision in the hands of the revolutionary party. Should it miss the critical situation, the latter veers around to its opposite. Under these circumstances the role of the party leadership acquires exceptional importance.... The role of the subjective factor in a period of slow, organic development can remain quite a subordinate one. Then diverse proverbs of gradualism arise, as: 'slow but sure', and 'one must not kick against the pricks', and so forth, which epitomize all the tactical wisdom of an organic epoch that abhorred 'leaping over stages.' But as soon as the objective prerequisites have matured, the key to the whole historical process passes into the hands of the subjective factor, that is, the party. Opportunism, which consciously or unconsciously thrives upon the inspiration of the past epoch, always tends to underestimate the role of the subjective factor, that is, the importance of the party and of revolutionary leadership.... Such an attitude, which is false in general, operates with positively fatal effect in the imperialist epoch." 11

To be continued

NOTES:

1 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

2 Friedrich Engels, *Revolution and counterrevolution in Germany*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/germany/ch07.htm>

3 Marx/Engels, *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist*

League, London, March 1850,
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

4 *ibid.*

5 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>

6 George von Vollmar, *Über die nächsten Aufgaben der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, Munich 1891

7 Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or revolution*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/ch01.htm>

8 Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Pluto Press, p.130

9 Leon Trotsky, *War and the International*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1914/war/index.htm>

10 *ibid*

11 Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/index.htm>

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