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Germany

Germany: What we are and why we fight - resolution of the ISO

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Description:

This resolution was adopted by a very large majority (one vote against, one abstention) by the founding conference of the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), German section of the Fourth International, held on December 3-4, 2016 in Frankfurt.

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From their membership of the Fourth International, the two organizations which meet have common bases, programmatic references and strategic orientations. But with the new organization, we wish to truly realize a new departure which leaves behind certain weaknesses of the past. At the same time, we wish to invite the forces which can meet in what is developed here to engage in a process of discussion and rapprochement in our common sectors of intervention. Our long term objective is to stubbornly work towards going beyond the current state of revolutionary and anti-capitalist forces and to do what we can to contribute to their rapprochement and regrouping.

What defines us politically

We are for:

- ▶ democratic rights, civil liberties, against generalised surveillance (including on the internet); - a revolutionary break with capitalism, for the replacement of the bourgeois state by the self-administration of the producers; - in the still-dependent countries, the growing over of democratic and national struggles into revolutionary anti-capitalist struggles; - a democratic socialism based on socialised ownership of the means of production, the self-organisation of workers, the self-determination of peoples and the guarantee of civil liberties, the separation of party and state; - pluralism of parties and multiplicity of tendencies; - the extension of forms of self-organisation and respect for democratic rules and rights in struggles; - the fight against all bureaucracies (whether Stalinist, social democratic, trade union, nationalist or other) which dominate mass organisations; - women's liberation and an autonomous women's movement; - gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer liberations, and opposition to all forms of sexual oppression; - respect for the right of self-determination and independence of oppressed peoples; - the fight against racism and all forms of chauvinism; - the separation of religion and state, the fight against religious fundamentalists; - defence of the environment from an anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic viewpoint; - an active internationalism and an anti-imperialist international solidarity, the defence of the workers' interests in every country without exception, without sectarianism or subordination to utilitarian or diplomatic considerations; - the construction of revolutionary, proletarian, feminist and democratic parties made up of active members, in which rights to free expression and the formation of tendencies are recognised and protected; - the construction of a revolutionary pluralist mass international.

It is to realise these objectives that we are part of an international grouping of revolutionary Marxist organisations from different countries. We have in common the conviction that we must unite our forces in order to play a determinant role in the class struggle of each country, which can lead to the victory of socialism. The development of its national sections is the means by which the Fourth International seeks to attain its emancipatory goal, because in the course of a revolution, an international organization cannot replace the action of a national section or act in its place.

It is precisely because, without doing ourselves violence, we have been able to meet on this programmatic basis, that during the process which has led to the fusion it clearly appeared that this unification should have been on the agenda for some time already. And we also want to stress here that with other forces, which have not participated in this process of rapprochement, but with who we often collaborate in a highly satisfactory manner, we see many common

points which would justify a common political and organizational orientation, and even make it appear as indispensable. Because we do not wish to give the impression that we with this new formation we rule out other possibilities of recomposition in the near future, that other opportunities for regroupment will be closed.

The following points are intended to specify the nature of our identity more clearly.

Recomposition of the left

With the fall of the Wall, there was for us a change of paradigm: a critique of Stalinism no longer had to confront the existence of the Soviet Union, but rather a manner of practicing politics without an emancipatory project which had survived Stalinism. We must break with this conception and these practices if we wish to find an internationalist and eco-socialist response to globalised capitalism.

Our identity is no longer solely informed by the label "Trotskyist". We consider ourselves today as an internationally organized current which seeks to contribute to the reconstitution of the consciousness of the political class and the formation of a mass anti-capitalist party, through the construction of revolutionary parties in each of the countries, and also a revolutionary international.

We should add that we have a high enough consciousness of ourselves to affirm that we have something of importance to contribute to this process. But that involves recognizing that we do not have readymade answers to every question. The gains from our discussions and ideological developments, our balance sheet of the 20th century, cannot in themselves provide usable models for elaborating the "correct" revolutionary politics we need today. That is why we are ready to learn from others.

That means that the defence of our ideas is not for a one way path but an exchange with the other components of the radical left on a basis of equality. That differentiates us from groups and organizations which draw their references from the same source as us, but which falsify this tradition in a doctrinaire and sectarian sense and finally discredit it. That is why, in a certain sense, to be an activist with us is not a "long tranquil river" :we do not wish to take away from anybody the responsibility of independent critical reflection and, much more, we seek people with whom we can reflect together on the lessons of the past and their links to the challenges of today. We wish to encourage creativity and initiative.

From our viewpoint, all the current parties and organisations, small or large, ours as much as the others, are only provisional phenomena which, in the best of cases, can play a positive role in the construction of the future revolutionary party and the international, in the sense of the organisation of the most conscious part of a movement in the class struggle and the social movements with emancipatory aims.

Unknown terrain

Everywhere where it is possible, we defend forms of organization capable of transforming workplace struggles or localized combats into conflicts which concern society as a whole (for example when we stress the general of strikes or branch level agreements). Our activists are involved in very varied sectors - not only in the trade unions, the trade union left, the social movements and educational associations of various types - but also in the attempts at fairly broad regroupments which work towards the recomposition of the radical left.

Where ever it is, when we are with others in local initiatives, committees or coordinations to act together on one or several points, we are active according to the following principles:

- ▶ We take into account the level of consciousness of those engaged in this struggle and we seek to realise the broadest unity; - We stress the autonomy of those who fight - even in relation to their own organisation - to allow the development of all types of organs, even embryonic, which are capable of contesting the right to initiative and control with the dominant apparatuses; - We defend democracy in the movements and organisations; - We seek to develop the consciousness that the basis of all wealth is the forces of nature, and that their protection and preservation is worth more than profit; - We are for a solidarity-based world order, for solidarity with the oppressed and exploited and not with the governments, we elaborate perspectives of struggle which transcend the framework of the national state; - We stress the need for a break with capitalism.

Serious work in several associations or committees naturally limits the time and energy available to work in one's political organization, and can even sometimes lead to phenomena of distancing from one's own organization.

It is not however by a distancing from these structures that the problem can be solved. Because we have to deal with a much more pressing problem: the illusion that revolutionary organizations can today be built in a "vacuum", without close contact with the broader processes of politicization. That leads to the construction of illusory worlds, a culture of "as if" for little groups who play at being parties, to pure propagandism and a miseducation; all the activity of the militants being devoted solely to what allows the identical reproduction of this organization and its little apparatuses, turning it more or less into a sect.

Although we are active in different sectors and movements and there is room for different practices with us, we discuss them together regularly and we try to link them with each other. It is with a common method - that of revolutionary Marxism - that we try to understand reality, put our experiences in common and draw balance sheets. It is thus that we organize and preserve a sort of "collective memory".

Developing consciousness

Movements can grow enormously over time, as is the case with the movement against environmental destruction. Anti-war movements experience highs and lows. Most protest movements are unstable. After a time they disintegrate or they are absorbed by the parties. That was the case with the Grünen (Greens), who only took a few years to abandon their opposition to the system and make themselves at home in it (for example in the parliaments and ministries). The desire to struggle, feel that one can do it, that one has the strength for it, experiences fluctuations. Those who, even outside of phases of the rise of big movements, remain active and reflect on what it is necessary to do so that the next wave is successful are the vanguard of the movements of emancipation. We are convinced that the relationship of the organization to the movements and vice-versa should always be a relationship of independence. Also, the total independence and separation of our organization from state institutions and enterprises is the first condition of our autonomy.

We do not hide our convictions. We are convinced that revolutionary socialists can only establish their credibility when, in the course of great movements, they are capable of ensuring that the majority of the population make concrete demands. It is out of the question that they behave in a way which instrumentalises other organizations and movements or specific individuals. We can only convince men and women to participate in our organization if our own behaviour is accord with our long term goals. Many people fear joining an organisation because they are afraid of losing their personal freedom. So they choose rather to work in rank and file committees, or "affinity based collectives". In working there, one has no obligations, but in fact one is also unorganised, because there is no lasting

political agreement, and these structures dissolve sooner or later. Often, they are not even democratic, because the decisions are taken by a few activists or by cliques.

Even in a revolutionary period, without the dynamising role of a revolutionary organization, the huge potential of an impetuous mass movement risks hanging fire. But one cannot gain a place in its leadership by self-proclaiming its legitimacy, or by administrative means. It is only possible politically, that is by conviction, democratically. We convince by our person and collective engagement and we do not seek to tell others how to behave.

Understanding the need for a revolutionary rupture is not today a very widespread thing outside of the radical left, even among those who have not much or nothing at all to lose in the context of this system. That is why we consider participation in the reconstruction of a political class consciousness as one of our main tasks. Following the victorious offensive of neoliberal capitalism, it has declined enormously. The great majority of the population, of the class of those who depend on a wage to survive, has lost the notion of a project which is specific to it. The attempts to imagine how we could live otherwise are received by a generalised scepticism, any kind of "ideology" is rejected, the question of power does not seem on any agenda. We have this present in spirit when we engaging in debate and make proposals for action. In our publications, we take account of the level of knowledge and consciousness of those we address. We wish to establish a bridge between their wishes and their immediate feelings and the strategic objectives of the conquest of political power by the wage earning class.

Political consciousness is multiple. Revolutionary consciousness is, in the "normal" period of class struggle, only present among a small minority of the population. The merciless struggle against the existing system and the radical rupture with the modes of behaviour marked by capitalist competition demand, in non-revolutionary times, a high level of political conviction and individual commitment. Preserving one's convictions can generally only be done at the price of great difficulties. The phases of decline in class activity lead most people to abandon the revolutionary ideals of their youth.

That is not the least of the reasons why it is vital for a revolutionary organization to continually recruit new youth so as to escape the danger of routinism and an inability to correctly approach new situations. Even non-revolutionary socialist consciousness is not very widespread today in the Federal Republic of Germany. There are few examples of active engagement for a revolutionary transformation. Nonetheless, the members of the radical left can constitute an important link among all those who seek to free broad layers (particularly in the trade unions) from the grip of a conception which only knows social partners, and lead them towards a politics of confrontation.

Organising ourselves democratically

We wish to be an organisation with a flat hierarchy where everyone is required to pitch in at all levels. But even a small organization of the radical left is not simply composed of "equals". Some have more influence than others. The constraints of and the time taken up professional activity, children and other obligations are not identical. Also some more or less make political work their profession or leisure activity, while others cannot do so or don't want to. Not everybody is at the same level of knowledge, familiarity with arguing, drawing up texts and so on. The members of leadership bodies have more influence than others.

That is why an organisation without clear democratic rules is inconceivable for us. It follows that functions and posts can only be occupied after an election and for a given, very limited, period. Then we vote again. For us this allows decisions to be transparent, and that is no small thing. Experience has shown us that in groups where there are not regular votes on important decisions, it is a more or less noticeable clique which decides in advance at secret meetings, in encounters in cafes or after the official end of a meeting. It is rare for this not to be a male clique.

A political grouping like ours, not very numerous but nonetheless represented across the whole of the country, needs a place where different experiences can be reported and discussed in common so the balance sheet can be drawn. We call this place the federal conference or coordination. The role of the coordination is to encourage members to act, coordinate, inform and educate themselves and to make them capable of forging their own opinion. It is there that the decisions which concern everyone are taken, after having sought the broadest possible consensus. If this is not possible, an open vote can be envisaged. The majority principle is an absolute rule, but it is not a goal in itself. If important decisions only receive a very narrow majority, it is the sign that it is better to seek a broader consensus and reopen the discussion.

If that doesn't work, the following fundamental principle applies: even a majority can be wrong. But that can only be established if the majority has the right to implement its proposals and the minority can freely criticise. That does not mean that there is no place in the organization for different practices and projects. When this is the case, we discuss it together regularly and we try to coordinate them. That requires a high level of critical capacity and comradely behaviour from everyone.

Despite the existence of a coordination, all the members should have the ability to decide at any time what their organization does, the federal conferences should be sovereign both formally and in reality, with the coordination determining overall orientation.

Without the broadest autonomy of local groups in the definition of their local activity, without the right for activists to discuss freely among themselves above the basic structures the politics, orientation and projects of the organization, the influence "from above" empties internal democracy of its content.

How we deal with divergences

At the end of the day it is about knowing how the organisation reacts when isolated members or groups have different viewpoints on certain questions, whether this amounts to divergences between themselves or in relation to the coordination. In this case, rights of tendency and faction play an important role for us. In summary: it is about the freedom of all comrades to form on all questions and at any time organised currents of opinion inside the organisation. This right is recorded in the statutes and cannot be challenged in practice. However this right is in no way a panacea. We know by experience to what point the game exacerbated by tendencies and factions can be damaging. For example, when it is no longer possible to influence the orientation or composition of leadership bodies except by belonging to one of the internal currents, or when the members - in particular the leading members - identify more with their tendency or faction than with the organization. Then polemic against other currents or diplomacy between them increasingly determines the life of the organisation. In this way also internal democracy can be considerably damaged.

And yet we defend the right of tendency and faction because it guarantees the right of expression of each comrade and reduces the risk of politically unjustified splits. But when tendencies and factions crystallize and persist, the cohesion of the organization is harmed.

Particularly in small organizations with a few dozen or a few hundred members, settling divergences through decisions taken by small majorities is often destructive. That is why the norm should be that the internal current set up before a conference are dissolved when it is over. For that, we need an organizational culture where the consensus and active participation of militants in the elaboration of what we wish and decide plays the most important role possible. So it is for the leadership bodies a task of the first importance to always do as much as possible so that the members take an active part in the definition of the positions and orientation of their organization,

and what practically flows from that.

Rather than strengthening divergences, discussion and decision taking should always be related to the concern to find out what we can do together despite our different viewpoints. The basic discussion on these divergences can be diverted towards the work of reflection and elaboration of the organisation, where, removed from the need to decide rapidly and in a deeper fashion, it is possible to discuss in a spirit of self-education. In the same way, we reject any moral pressure on activists to lead them towards taking a position in favour of an internal sensitivity.

On the other hand, belonging to a common political organisation is not a goal in itself. There is a limit: where there is no longer common political work or the capacity to act together. We pay attention to what happens in situations where members feel pushed outside of or to the margins of the organization. For that we need an organizational culture where consensus and active participation in the definition of common objectives and decision taking play the greatest role possible.

An organisation for its members

We are a community of people who rebel against the social order. Critique is our vital element. We cannot conceive of a truly revolutionary organisation without free discussion. It is however only possible in the comradely community of the group. That is why organizing ourselves is a condition of our free development as political individuals. We unite to work on a common political basis. That done, we do not abandon our individuality. But we reduce the social differences, between young and old, men and women, native and immigrant.

Defining the utility of the organization for its members is a vast enterprise. That goes from participation in a context of rich and stimulating discussion up to efficacy in common action. That implies obligations, among them financially supporting the organisation through dues and, according to the possibilities of each person, participation in its activities and the definition of its orientations. But if the members do not feel that membership of the organisation is useful to their effectiveness and their personal development at the political level, that they do not live in a space where practical solidarity and internationalism exists no formal appeal to obligation can be useful.

Better, the organization should prepare and accompany all it wishes to do by political persuasion and the motivation of its members. It should not try to dictate to members what they should think. Only one's own convictions can be presented externally in a convincing fashion. That is why minority opinions (of local groups, currents, isolated militants) should be able to be expressed openly. The sole conditions are that it is clearly specified that one is not speaking in the name of the organisation, and that these minority opinions fall within the common programmatic framework. Exerting discipline over opinions does not make revolutionaries sure of themselves as independent thinkers, but a repellent blend of zombies and robots.

The utility of the organization for its members and for the struggle in favour of what we want does not increase if everybody does the same thing in the same way. It increases much better if the political militants engaged in very different sectors and with very different ways of doing things exchange their experiences, confront them, draw the balance sheet, and seek permanently to cooperate in action and pull together on the same rope - and as much as possible in the same direction.

By organizing collectively, we can gain in political and organizational experience, and develop our personal capacities more than by remaining isolated. Certainly, that requires being ready for open discussion, mutual confidence, comradely relations, but that opens in return the possibility of finding oneself with a group inside the organization.

An organisation for youth

In organisational construction as we conceive it, winning youth and integrating them on a lasting basis is a priority. That excludes both the idea of burning them out through activism and banning what might be called the modes of behaviour specific to youth.

One of the ways to encourage youth to participate in a revolutionary organization is to set up a specific independent structure for youth, which can preserve its dynamism at its own rhythm and with its own rhythm and with its own forms of action, including the right to make "mistakes" without being bothered by "adults" in their own development. It is naturally the young comrades who will know what form of intervention is most appropriate among youth. If the construction of a youth organization or something of the same order, in sympathy with our programme, proves feasible, we will actively support this project.

An organization for women

The first social oppression, well before the complete establishment of class society, was the oppression of women by men. This oppression persists until now. Patriarchal structures are to large degree strengthened by class society. This oppression represents a considerable weakening of the working class as a whole. Without the fight for women's liberation, the socialist transformation cannot be attained, and not can it be guaranteed that it would really be the point of departure of a general suppression of exploitation and oppression.

In the workers' movement also, including in its revolutionary component, women were and are oppressed. We support everything that goes in the direction of an autonomous women's movement, because it is the sole means of effectively advancing the fight for women's liberation.

In our own organisation also, the dominant male behaviour constitutes an obstacle to the blossoming of the political activity of women. It is then necessary to make a constant and conscious effort to fight and transcend this, both through political education and through specific organizational measures like the right of women to caucus at any time and all levels of the organization, or again the establishment of quotas in leadership bodies if women request it. And in the event that several currents are presenting themselves for voting, quotas for each political current.

In a revolutionary organization, the political culture of the society that we wish to see should already be perceptible. Workers' democracy and self-organization are not goals for tomorrow. Even if they can only be fully developed after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, these principles should already enter into force in the ranks of the workers' movement, and in the first place inside revolutionary Marxist organizations. For us internal democracy is a bridge towards the democracy of the councils.