

A further shift to the right by the German Social Democrats

SPD chooses Schröder to challenge Kohl in September election

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7 March 1998

Gerhard Schröder, the prime minister of Lower Saxony, and not party chairman Oskar Lafontaine, will be the candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for chancellor in the Bundestag (federal parliament) elections this coming autumn.

After three years of internal as well as public debate, the SPD finally took the decision on March 1. On the same day Schröder and the SPD won almost 48 percent of the vote in the state elections in Lower Saxony. With an increase of nearly 4 percent, the SPD maintained its absolute majority in the state legislature.

Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl had actively participated in the election campaign on behalf of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The results were seen as a devastating defeat for the CDU and for Kohl personally. Under the present political conditions in Germany, Schröder's selection to head up the SPD campaign means that he will not only be Kohl's challenger, but, in all likelihood, his successor.

The fall elections will be held under conditions of economic upheaval and the deepest social and political crisis in Germany since the Second World War. Unemployment has reached the level of 1932-33, with 5 million officially registered as jobless and another 2 million unregistered unemployed.

On the eve of the Lower Saxony elections, former Bundesbank president Karl-Otto Pohl appeared on the main television channel saying that everyone should be prepared for an even more rapid rise in unemployment. "The task of the next federal government," said Pohl, is to "put an end to the half-measures of the Kohl government." This will mean a more ruthless and consistent attack on wage levels and social benefits.

Just who is this man apparently destined to lead the next federal government?

Schröder's roots are in the most right-wing section of the SPD. At the time of the student protests of the early 1970s he had already distinguished himself as a representative of the party's most conservative elements.

Elections at the SPD Youth (Juso) congresses were held under the slogan "Stop Schröder!" Nevertheless, he became head of the Jusos. The party executive committee simply opposed him to elected Juso Chairman Uwe Benneter, a left-winger. Through an alliance with party "apparatchiks" and the right-wing party and trade union bureaucracy, Schröder later became prime minister in Lower Saxony, overcoming strong internal party resistance.

His state government has pursued a drastic policy of cutting wages, jobs and social expenditures. Schröder sits on the supervisory board of Volkswagen, where, together with the unions, he has played a major role in the luring of General Motors' most notorious cost-cutter, José Ignacio Lopez, away from the US auto giant. Lopez proceeded to push through a rigorous cost-saving program, including a four-day week and a corresponding 20 percent cut in take-home pay for VW workers. In order to justify cuts in jobs and wages, and an increase in overtime work for teachers in Lower Saxony, Schröder disparaged them with the epithet "lazybones."

Schröder can generally be found among the most virulent supporters of attacks on democratic rights, such as the right to asylum, and the most vehement defenders of abusive practices by the police. He has so openly and provocatively pursued a right-wing course that he still encounters opposition as the "bosses' comrade" inside the SPD. This reputation is all the more striking, given the rightward shift in the party as a whole over the past number of years.

There is no doubt Schröder would have failed to win the party's nomination for chancellor had the decision been left to a membership vote, as in 1993. For the most part, party members, functionaries and parliamentary deputies back his chief rival, Lafontaine. Why then, was Schröder chosen?

On fundamental questions of program, Schröder and Lafontaine agree. Both want to make wages, jobs and working time more flexible, after the American and Dutch models. They both support the demand of German big business for full-time jobs to be replaced by low-paid, part-time work; for the long-term unemployed and welfare recipients to be driven into forced work programs; and for state spending to be slashed by cutting jobs and wages in the public sector.

There are, however, tactical differences over how these policies are to be carried out in practice. Schröder has adopted Tony Blair, the British prime minister, as his role model. Like Blair and the British Labour Party, Schröder has used the SPD as the springboard for his personal career. And like the British prime minister, he demonstratively sets regional or national profit interests above all else, treating his party and its various factions with open disdain. This has brought him the sympathy of the bourgeoisie.

Lafontaine is somewhat more in the mold of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. He strives to respond to opposition within the German public and within the SPD itself, the better to neutralize it. He generally proves himself the more cunning party tactician.

Time and again Lafontaine has used tricks and subterfuge to pull dissident voices in the SPD behind a “common discipline,” i.e., to subordinate them to the right wing. In this way he made sure that the SPD supported the abolition of the right to asylum in 1992-93. This year he has secured SPD support for a constitutional amendment to remove legal constraints on the bugging of private homes and the offices of journalists, doctors and solicitors.

Whether the question has been cuts in welfare, student grants, pensions or unemployment benefits, Lafontaine has come forward at every critical point to help Kohl obtain a majority in the Bundesrat (upper house).

Given Lafontaine’s expertise as a political fixer, and the absence of any principled political differences between himself and Schröder, there is reason to suspect that the entire business of choosing the candidate for chancellor was rigged from the start. In any case, the agreement struck after the Mannheim party conference to make the choice of the party’s candidate dependent on the result of the Lower Saxony elections meant the issue would not be decided by an open clash of opinions within the SPD. “Higher forces”—i.e., industry, the banks, the corporate media—would be given a freer hand to intervene so as to decide the matter through their own means and in their own interests.

In these circles the fate of Kohl had been fairly well sealed. They had for some time arrived at a consensus that the incumbent chancellor had to go. Kohl’s coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) had a diverse clientele with differing interests: banks, industrial concerns, small employers, the Church, farmers, a section of workers, academics. Under the prevailing conditions of the past decades of generally rising incomes and social compromise between the main classes, these diverse interests could be contained within the ruling coalition. Today, however, with poverty and unemployment on the rise, the constituent elements pull away from one another.

Moreover, in the recent period Kohl’s cabinet has shown itself to be politically exhausted, and incapable of carrying out the radical measures demanded by big business to increase the competitiveness of German capitalism. They have not even succeeded in passing long-promised tax reforms, designed to funnel billions of marks to the employers and the rich.

Within those sections of the German ruling class that favor bringing the SPD to power—whether in a coalition with the Greens or in a grand coalition with the CDU/CSU—Schröder has been the strong favorite from the start. But these forces insist that the SPD and its members be unconditionally subordinated to any government Schröder might head, and that the working class be kept under control.

This is where the services of Lafontaine are required. A “change in Bonn” is being prepared on the basis of Schröder as government chief and Lafontaine as the taskmaster of the SPD, protecting his flank. The two are not so much rivals as they are a team. Over the

past several months the groundwork for a change in government has been laid, the mechanics of the operation tested, and the personnel selected. All of the participants have played their assigned roles, whether willingly or unwillingly.

Schröder was built up by the media as a popular “mover and shaker,” a future chancellor who could “make things happen in Bonn.” An army of journalists surrounded Schröder, not to throw light on his policies, but to market his personality.

Each week the opinion polls dutifully recorded a growth in his popularity. Under different circumstances his turbulent private life could have been used to tarnish his public persona, or even remove him as a contender for the chancellor’s post. There is, after all, no reason to believe that the German media outlets, when it comes to such questions, have any more scruples than their American counterparts.

But to date Schröder has received the soft glove treatment. Not even his divorce—completed six months ago at least in part for politically opportune reasons—has hurt him. Instead the public has been inundated with ingratiating details of his private life, reported in magazines, newspapers and tabloids. Every banality of this banal person, such as his love for consuming Bratwurst mit Sauerkraut at motorway restaurants, has been presented as proof that he is a “man of the people.”

The day before the election a two-page advertisement appeared in all the papers in Lower Saxony with the headline: “The next chancellor must come from Lower Saxony.” Those responsible for placing this ad remain anonymous, but their social position is no mystery. The cost of these ads ran into the millions.

The state election was conducted by Schröder and presented by the media as a sort of American-style “primary.” But there was really no choice at all. SPD voters who opposed Schröder and his pro-business policies had no chance of expressing themselves if they did not want to vote for Kohl’s CDU.

The Lower Saxony elections were used to neutralize opposition inside the SPD to Schröder and his policies. Lafontaine effectively silenced any such dissent by arguing that an election victory in Lower Saxony should not be endangered by a “discussion of personalities.” Shortly before the vote it was announced that the party executive would make its decision on the SPD candidate for chancellor the day the election result was declared. In the end, however, even this party committee had no say. On the evening of the election, Lafontaine had Schröder publicly introduced as the SPD candidate.

Now that the decision has been made, any trace of opposition, no matter how timid, will be suppressed even more rigorously. All SPD politicians, from the right to the left of the party, reacted to the naming of Schröder with a call to “close ranks” and establish “iron discipline.” Such is the manner in which the SPD prepares to take on the role of governing party.



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