German SPD leader Gerhard Schröder: The social climber

Wolfgang Weber
8 May 1998

"Those who have the power call the tune. Those who don't, have it hard."
A maxim of Gerhard Schröder

Schröder is his name. But who is this man, who is putting himself forward to become Chancellor of Germany?

The son of a war widow, he grew up in a family of 5 children in village surroundings. From childhood on, he experienced in an acute way, and felt very bitterly, the inequities of society. His father, a carnival worker, was killed in the war shortly after his birth. His stepfather soon became ill with tuberculosis and died.

The poverty, coarseness and backwardness of village life marked his youth. They endowed him with the ability to endure many things without giving up, and to stubbornly pursue his own ends. This lent him the unbridled and dogged will to put these circumstances behind him no matter what price had to be paid. He finished his high school curriculum and obtained his diploma by attending adult education classes, which was very unusual at that time. He even had to find work during the holidays to support himself.

Undoubtedly it was the inequality in society that early on formed the leitmotiv of his life and dictated his professional and political path. But this did not consist in overcoming disparity by changing society; rather, he sought to get to the other side, i.e., to climb the social ladder in the society that exists. Broader visions of a new and better society and theoretical debates about such a society were always far from his thinking. "Habermas, Marcuse, Marx... they were all too theoretical for me. I was never part of the '68 generation,'" Schröder later said about himself. He decided to study law because it was "more craft than science, more practice than theory."

Nevertheless, the radical protests of young people in the sixties and seventies exerted an influence on him. Although he had already joined the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1963, it was not until the advent of the student movement that he became politically active, when many workers and youth were inspired by Willy Brandt and his reformist policies. In 1969 he became chairman of Jusos, the SPD youth organisation, in Göttingen, and then later in the regional capital of Hannover.

At that time there were three feuding factions inside Jusos opposing the policies of the governing SPD. One faction, the so-called "Reform Socialists," was led by the current SPD politicians Rudolf Sharping, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, Norbert Gansel and Ottmar Schreiner. They sought "to democratise society with reformist parliamentary policies." A second faction was the "Stamokap wing." Influenced by the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party), it sought to "conquer state power" with the SPD and thus "overcome the structures of capitalism." Finally there was the so-called "Anti-revisionists," who expected to achieve "socialist development" through "spontaneity" and the "small-scale local activity" of communal politics and youth work. Schröder was drawn towards the last group. As he later said, he preferred to pursue "gut politics."

Schröder described himself at that time as a "Marxist" and "socialist," but he neither supported nor understood the scientific views and political aims of Marxism. Like all the Jusos and petty-bourgeois radicals at the time of the student movement, what he expressed through such terms was not the perspective of a revolutionary socialist transformation of society by the working class, but rather the diffuse wish for an improvement of existing conditions.

Professionally, he became a lawyer, and in 1976 he became partner in an attorney's office together with an SPD friend and former army officer. He represented DKP members in trials against the Berufsverbot (the law forbidding communists from working in the public sector). He defended opponents of atomic energy such as Jo Leinen against charges of breach of the peace and other forms of state harassment. In 1981, as a freshly elected parliamentary deputy, he opposed rent increases. As an SPD member of the "Youth Inquiry Commission," he insisted that representatives of the government and state show "understanding for punks" and their activities.

There is no reason to doubt that at the beginning of his professional career as a lawyer, and in his political work in the SPD, the young Schröder was indeed motivated by the aims he later described—wanting to secure the release of those who were being unjustly treated by the state or society, and helping the socially deprived.

How then, can one explain that barely two decades later, as Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, he ordered military-style measures against youth in Hannover with the words: "Those who come here to create chaos shouldn't be surprised if they get their hides tanned?" Or the fact that he moved through the state parliament a programme of cuts that punished the socially disadvantaged, the youth, the unemployed, the disabled and the blind? Or that under his state government the deportation of refugees, and the bugging and intimidation by the police of "enemies of the constitution," i.e., all real and imagined political opponents, has assumed gigantic proportions?

In the course of these 20 years he has clearly lost sight of his modest reformist and democratic aims. This cannot simply be explained by Schröder's personality, but is bound up with the transformation of the entire SPD. Of course, Gerhard Schröder himself contributed decisively to the SPD becoming a party of social austerity.

This had already begun with his work as chairman of the Jusos. He assumed this office in 1978 as the student movement was ebbing. By that time the rebellious youth were being socially integrated through the extension of schools, universities, hospitals and other state institutions, and politically intimidated through the "Berufsverbot," the anti-terror laws and similar measures. His predecessor, Uwe Benneter, from the "Stamokap wing," had been removed by the SPD leadership for "communist sympathies" and expelled from the party. Benneter had openly argued for collaboration with the DKP. Schröder then made an alliance with the "Stamokaps" to gain sufficient votes to be elected chairman. Once elected, however, he rejected any further collaboration

© World Socialist Web Site

with the DKP and promised the SPD government under Helmut Schmidt the "critical support" of Jusos.

Schröder described the international Bertrand Russell Tribunal, which investigated human rights abuses in West Germany in connection with state rearmament and repressive measures against the RAF (Red Army Faction) terrorists, "important and correct." However, he said Jusos "could not support such propagandist ostracism of an SPD-led government."

In order to win influence amongst the opponents of nuclear energy he participated, as Juso chairman, in demonstrations at the Bonn-Hofgarten. At the same time, he secured a majority for Schmidt at the SPD Congress in Hamburg and afterwards told Jusos that the conference decisions were also binding for them: "Without Schmidt we can't win the federal elections in 1980."

Schmidt defeated Franz Josef Strauss, the candidate of the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), whereupon Gerhard Schröder climbed the next rung in his career ladder and entered the Bundestag (parliament) for the first time. As he himself reported, he took two principles with him into parliament: never vote against the party, and never force the SPD chancellor to threaten his resignation. While preserving his reputation as a "left," the new deputy supported the delivery of tanks to Saudi Arabia with the argument, "Otherwise the USA will deliver their weapons and exert their influence in the Middle East, and they are much more dangerous than German weapons."

He shared the anti-American reservations of the "Peace movement" regarding additional atomic armaments for NATO, and publicly promised to vote separately against every defence item in the draft budget. Did he know there were no separate votes for specific items? At the end of the debate, in any event, Schröder voted for the whole budget. As usual, he put forward his standard justification: "What's important is winning a majority, not fussing over what's right and what's wrong!"

Based on the same consideration of immediate political gains, Schröder sought a new springboard for his climb to the top in 1983, following the end of the SPD coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (FDP). He made his approach to the electorate of the Greens. In the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* he analysed the collapse of the Schmidt government as follows: "Anti terror laws, Berufsverbot, attacks by the police and the judiciary, the intimidation of demonstrators... do not appear compatible with Brandt's programme, and correctly so. The SPD has lost its identity as a morally integral organisation... The belief that economic growth can be equated with progress has collapsed amongst the enlightened middle classes... In future, politics in the workers' interests are politics which take up green and alternative aims, to a large extent."

With this in mind, he had himself voted in as party chairman in Hannover, one of the largest SPD districts. He then made sure that his name was mentioned for the top spot on the party list in the 1984 regional elections in Lower Saxony: "Under no circumstances will I not apply to be a candidate." By means of a tactical alliance with influential right-wing state politicians, to whom he entrusted the party leadership, he was able to push himself forward.

However, he only succeeded in winning the Lower Saxony State Chancellery in a Red-Green coalition on the second attempt, in 1990. He had just taken office when the political situation in Germany changed fundamentally. With the collapse of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany], the post-war period came to an end, both at home and abroad. Economically and militarily strengthened, the increasingly self-assured German bourgeoisie sought to confront their rivals in the sphere of world politics, especially the USA. They no longer saw a basis for the policy of social reforms and compromises that had stabilised their rule after 1945. The bourgeoisie now demanded the complete subordination of the SPD and the trade unions to their global and European strategy.

Since then, Schröder has demonstrated his adaptability once again. He is determined to prove himself the most zealous and successful servant of the big companies and banks. He demonstratively acts as the man of big business—as organiser of a "German auto summit," making his appearance at the Vienna Opera ball, serving on the board of directors of VW, the Norddeutsche Landesbank and the Deutsche Messe AG.

At VW he is one of the initiators of the 4-day-week, with a corresponding cut in workers' income. He sets up a test track for Daimler-Benz on the Pappenburg Moor. The Greens, his government coalition partners, help him suppress the protests of the environmentalists. For the benefit of the Meyer Shipyards in Pappenburg, and once again in opposition to the protests of the ecologists, he gives permission for the dredging of the river Ems to facilitate the building of luxury ships, and he installs a pipeline through the Watten sea for the Norwegian energy company Statoil.

In the realm of immigration and refugee policy, he promotes state racism. Attacks by the police and judiciary, which he criticised 10 years previously, become daily occurrences under his government.

Far sooner than the SPD national executive and parliamentary leadership, he energetically pushes—under the pressure of the increasingly desolate finances of his own state government, dependent on the investments, taxes and other payments of the transnational companies such as VW, Daimler Benz and Continental—for the transformation of the SPD into a party of big business and a strong state.

Following years of internal party strife, his election as candidate for Federal Chancellor indicates that the SPD has finally shed its skin—not just a wing of the party, but the SPD as a whole. The fact that this election was decided through the media, through the direct influence of the bourgeoisie, only proves that this transformation has been successfully brought to a conclusion.

Schröder's personal relationships cast further light on the politician. They are closely bound up with the various stages of his rise to prominence. He stayed with his childhood sweetheart from a neighbouring village only until his entry into politics and professional life. During his time as "left Juso leader" he was accompanied by Anna Taschenmacher, a teacher from the Stalinist influenced SHB Juso student organisation. His relationship in the 80s with Hildrud Hampel, the wife of a policeman, arose from his search for new layers of voters and new concepts to aid his rise to prominence in Lower Saxony. With her concern for the children of Chernobyl, the hole in the ozone layer, the plight of the Watten sea, persecuted bats and other small furry animals, Hildrud helped him win votes and media attention—up until the 1990s, when she increasingly became an obstacle to the new *Zeitgeist* and Schröder's unconditional worship of the market economy.

What could better embody this new orientation than his fourth marriage, to Doris Köpf, a reporter from the right-wing magazine *Focus*?

Examining Gerhard Schröder's career as a whole, one is forced to conclude that the man who will be, in all probability, the next German Chancellor, is one whose political views and perspectives have developed in an area of activity spanning just 300 kilometres between Lemgo, Göttingen, Hannover and—for a very short period—Bonn. Like Kohl, he does not speak a single foreign language and has visited other countries only in the course of his official political and economic trips abroad.

Many details of his life astonishingly parallels the biography of Bill Clinton. The childhood of a semi-orphan, the climb upward from impoverished conditions "through one's own hard work," anti-government protests as a student, then the career of an unbridled provincial opportunist. In the eyes of big business, this boundless adaptability qualified him for the highest national office.

As with Clinton in America, the ruling circles and the media chose Schröder in Germany. What the bourgeoisie requires today is precisely this type of social climber—people who are ready to do anything to insure

© World Socialist Web Site

that they do not fall back down the social ladder, go-getters who knuckle down to defend the state against any opposition movement from workers and youth “without wavering.”

It is a species of narrow-minded, petty-bourgeois politicians who are incapable of thinking two steps ahead and objectively assessing the results of their own actions. If Schröder were able to predict the consequences for the whole of society of his “Standortpolitik” (nationalist or regional policy)—the competition to slash wages and dismantle the welfare state—perhaps he himself would hesitate. But his unruffled egoism and shortsightedness know no scruples—and this is precisely what makes him useful for the bourgeoisie.

At the same time, the fact that the bourgeoisie have chosen him to replace Kohl demonstrates the enormous crisis and decline of bourgeois politics. Production, trade, finance, communication, science and technology are all making revolutionary strides and developing on a global scale. Yet the top posts in state and society are offered to the most limited opportunists from the provinces. Hardly a sign of great perspectives, or even a workable concept for the future on the part of the ruling class.

Also available in German

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site