

Three cheers for small-mindedness!

Joschka Fischer's answer to globalisation

WSWS review of a new book by the leader of Germany's Greens

Peter Schwarz
23 June 1998

"If you had remained silent, you would have remained a philosopher."

(Latin proverb)

Well in time for the federal elections taking place in September, the ideological spokesman and leading candidate of the Greens, Joschka Fischer, has presented his political conceptions in a book. Entitled *Für einen neuen Gesellschaftsvertrag* (*For a New Social Contract*), the book presents, over a span of 300 pages, Fischer's personal convictions.

"As distinct from a party programme, which always expresses coercive inner-party compromise," he writes in the foreword, "a book offers the possibility ... of clarifying and substantiating the personal standpoint that transcends inner-party considerations."

Fischer regards himself as a representative of the "German left"—a term he uses very broadly. As he remarks in a footnote, he includes in this category, alongside the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Greens, the trade unions, various social movements and rank-and-file Christian initiatives, "even the social wing of the Christian democratic parties".

However, Fischer distinguishes himself from numerous other representatives of this "left" on one decisive point: Whereas they are closing their eyes to the tumultuous changes presently taking place in the world economy, Fischer believes that globalisation is *the* decisive change of our times.

The entire first half of the book, with the heading "The Global Revolution", is dedicated to this theme. Fischer never tires of describing the far-reaching consequences of globalisation, in which connection he uses the terms "revolution" and "revolutionary" in a truly hyperbolic manner. He quotes at length from the appropriate studies of Lester Thurow, Hans Peter Martin and Harald Schuman, Paul Kennedy, Robert Reich and many others who have written on this subject. "The global revolution of the world economy," he stresses time and again, will "hit Western society head on, and will barely leave one stone unturned in the economy, in society, in politics and in culture." He describes the social outcome of this development in drastic terms: a growth of mass unemployment, a drop in wages and social benefits, an undermining of the nation state.

Globalisation, Fischer insists, can be neither halted nor reversed. "Just as it proved futile for the early socialists, as well as the craft workers and peasants of the day, to oppose the first industrial

revolution starting from the end of the seventeenth century, and even more futile in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ... so today the European Left will fare no better if they stand against this epochal process of globalisation."

But what is Fischer's "political answer to the global revolution", as he subtitles his book? The second part of the book is dedicated to this question. However, the direction toward which his answer inclines—or rather, the direction of its failure—can already be found in the first half.

Firstly, Fischer excludes every solution that is predicated on an active intervention by the working class. Will "class compromise between labour and capital necessarily become transformed into new class struggles?" he anxiously asks. "For Europe, that would be a worrying perspective."

Preventing such class struggles is his main concern. He conceives himself not as the representative of a definite class or social group, nor as the champion of a principle or a certain model of society. Rather he presents himself as the level-headed statesman, standing above the classes who, faced with the widening social gulf, has only one care: society's "peaceful coherence". This, he says, "the question of its cohesion," is the "new social question of Western society."

Secondly, he insists that the foundations of the capitalist social order may not be infringed upon. In this context, he continually returns to the Soviet Union, revealing an unrefined anti-communism normally encountered only in the publications of the extreme right. The real history of the Soviet Union—the bitter struggles between the bureaucracy, the working class and the peasantry from which the bureaucracy emerged as victor—is of no interest to Fischer. He only draws one conclusion from this most eventful chapter of human history: the sanctification of the market.

"The Leninist-Stalinist Soviet Union," he claims at one point, "with its elimination of the market in favour of an absolute state, provides a practical example of the abrogation of the market as counterweight to the state, and to the present day the peoples and economies subjected to this experiment are paying a terrible price for this totalitarian madness." His tirades culminate in the claim that "communist Marxism" aims "at creating equality at the expense of freedom."

"Freedom" and the "market" are largely identical concepts in Fischer's world view. He regards the "market" not simply as an

economic cure-all, but, as he mistrusts every mass movement from below, he ascribes to the market the political function of counteracting, as a democratic corrective, the omnipotence of the state. Who can wonder then, when he praises the “Rhenish capitalism” of Adenauer and Erhard (post-war Christian democratic Chancellors) in almost lyrical terms? This “Western European triad of democracy, market economy and welfare state” is to be “reconstructed and made fit for the future under the new conditions of globalism.”

How does Fischer propose to bring this about? What does he suggest as the concrete “political answer to the global revolution”? What should comprise the “new social contract” which he announces in the title of his book? To sum it up: he wants to cushion the negative social effects of globalisation by creating an army of petty proprietors—from the self-employed, the quasi-self-employed and the small businessmen.

His key thesis runs: one must take up “the struggle to bring about real independence for the mass of emerging small and even smaller businesses in the ‘entrepreneurial knowledge-based society’.” This in turn begins “with the creation of personal capital,” opening up “a completely new chapter of social emancipation.”

The political left should “forget the already faded traditional class struggle images of employer as exploiter, and concentrate on the improvement of the economic and political conditions of a new German expansion in service sector capitalism.” At the end of the book he proclaims the need to take “the step from co-determination [the post-war system of union-management factory committees] to co-ownership.”

Such astonishing naïveté! Was it not the mass of such petty proprietors who formed the most erratic and wavering element in society in the twentieth century? And yet it is these very layers on whom Fischer wants to base the peaceful cohesion of society.

Are independent small businesses not also subject to the ups and downs of the market and the dictates of the banks? In face of the predominance of powerful monopolies in every area of the economy, is their independence not a pure illusion?

In times of crisis, have not Hitler and Mussolini, and today’s neo-fascists like Le Pen in France and Haider in Austria, been able to find an effective recruiting ground amongst these layers? Fischer is so imbued with trust in capitalism that he is blind to the social consequences of the politics he proposes.

The hope that the social crisis can be resolved through the creation of a mass of self-employed proprietors and independent businesses is beyond the bounds of reality. Looked at in the cold light of day, Fischer’s call for more self-employment simply means abolishing the advantages which employee status still can bring: regular hours of work, a guaranteed income, social insurance, etc. Parallel to this, he wants drastic cuts in state benefits. “The welfare state as the guarantor of continually rising well-being,” he announces, “can hardly be maintained.”

In answer to mass unemployment, he proposes the establishment of a “third, social sector of the labour market,” which can mix “state labour policies and competitive, small-scale entrepreneurial initiatives, these in turn combining with self-organised and voluntary initiatives.” This should serve “a multitude of

geographically specific social needs through a small-scale local service sector.” The “minimal wages” paid in this sector (the term is Fischer’s) should be improved through tax financed wage subsidies, instead of the previous system of unemployment benefits and welfare. Of course, there has to be a measure of compulsion. “Naturally in a basic insurance system a quite different pressure will be exerted on those claiming benefits towards individual initiative, so that the financeability of the system will not be exceeded.” This is how it is put in Fischer’s convoluted language.

Fischer’s blind faith in capitalism becomes clear as well when he calls for the “anchoring of the welfare state in capitalist property, to be funded from capital gains.” “Share capitalism,” he reasons, “will be the dominant organisational form in the era of globalisation, the new social and generational contract will be oriented to this.” And what happens if the stock markets collapse, which is more than probable in face of rapid share rises that do not at all correspond to the underlying profitability of business? The pensions of millions would then be affected. Fischer does not foresee that he is proposing another social time bomb of unknown explosiveness.

In summary, it would have been better for Fischer’s reputation as a politician if he had not written this book. He has read much but understood little, and thought through even less. With a convoluted style, in which the complexity of his expression stands in inverse proportion to the simplicity of the statement, he regurgitates all the current political prejudices.

Fischer’s book gives no answer to the global revolution, but says a lot about the personality and politics of Fischer. The protester from the 1960s has exchanged the outlook of a house squatter for that of a house owner. The two are not so very far apart. He combines the reverence of the little man for big capital with the striving to build a society in his own image. The fact that this man is widely treated as a “political talent” and future foreign minister throws a sharp light on the crisis of bourgeois politics.

Leaving aside all of the inconsistencies and contradictions, one thing remains: the determination to defend the existing order, whatever the cost.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact