

The German Green Party at war

Ulrich Rippert
30 April 1999

The repulsive spectacle presented by the German Green Party over the past weeks as a party of war and government defies description. When and where has there been a party which so fundamentally betrayed its principles in such a short period of time? Is there any parallel to be found to the complete irresponsibility with which the Greens have used their position as part of the ruling SPD-Green coalition? Every fundamental party standpoint has been cast to the winds, and one reads the present assertions by many leading Green politicians in government that they completely exclude any support for the intervention of ground troops in Kosovo as the anticipation of their imminent agreement to take precisely such a step.

The Greens will leave one lasting impression: that the party added a new dimension to the concept "a lack of principles".

One recalls to mind the betrayal of the SPD at the beginning of the century when the party agreed to the awarding of the Kaiser's war credits in August 1914 and so opened the way for the first global slaughter of this century. At that time, on the occasion of war, a party broke with its political traditions and contradicted everything which it had defended and taught up until then. Looking back, however, it is clear that the transformation of the SPD had begun much earlier and developed over a number of years.

But as for the Greens! Here we have not merely the degeneration of a party, here opportunism itself has taken the shape of a party. There is only one principle which this party represents with conviction: its own utter spinelessness. In response to the slightest pressure, and often with premature subservience, the party seamlessly adapts to the prevailing winds. Withdrawal from atomic energy, taxation of the major energy users and abusers of the environment, ecological reconstruction, pacifism, etc.--there is not one of its former political principles which it has failed to trample into the dirt. Upon assuming power the Greens have pushed through most of those measures which the party prevented from passing into law when it operated as an opposition to the former conservative Kohl government.

Despite the considerable consequences for the future of the Red-Green government, it is a matter of little significance whether or how the party weathers its forthcoming special party conference on May 13. The political collapse of the party is not on the horizon--it has already taken place. The repeated incantation along the lines that "every party member is deeply

divided", but the party as a whole is united, is simply laughable. The permanent complaining and lamenting over their own doubts, scruples and pangs of conscience only serve to make clear that there is not a soul in the leading bodies of this organisation who has the slightest compass or political orientation.

What is the source of this rapid political bankruptcy? How is it to be understood?

There are certainly a number of reasons. One is without doubt the leading personnel of the party. Its leader, Joschka Fischer, is a typical German philistine, a man who combines the ability to adapt politically with the urgent drive to reach the top. In the course of so doing he does not acknowledge the slightest responsibility for the results of his actions. With the same superficial art of bluster, and without thinking through a single question, he defends today the exact opposite of what he thought and said yesterday--a political windbag without convictions, never mind principles, drawing his arguments from those who at the current moment are exerting the most pressure upon him. Through it all he remains thoroughly self-assured. As is so often the case, pride and stupidity are cut from the same cloth.

It would be an overestimation of Fischer himself, however, if one identified him as the only or major cause for the decline of the Greens. We are dealing with a social and not just an individual process. The present war acts as a form of political catalyst. It accelerates political processes and brings to the surface social processes previously hidden from view.

The construction of a Red-Green coalition in Germany meant that a generation had taken power which made its first political experiences in the protest movement of the late sixties. There was at that time a broad opposition, especially among youth, to the war in Vietnam and to the increasing appearance of former Nazis in German political life. (In 1968 the neo-fascist NPD won 9.8 percent of the vote in state elections in Baden Württemberg).

Since then a number of representatives of the protest movement have changed their standpoint on many occasions. This reached an extreme form with the transformation of a formerly crucial slogan--"No more war! No more fascism!"--into an argument for the current bombing, which has increasingly assumed the form of terror against the entire Serb population. Former spokesmen of the student protest such as

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the leading candidate for the French Greens in the forthcoming European elections, do not tire of repeating the demand for the rapid intervention of ground troops in the Kosovo war.

One explanation for this transformation is that the radicalism of the 68-ers had less to do with politics and was rather more related to age: that what in fact took place, in a pronounced form, was the traditional rebellion of the sons against their fathers. At some point, however, the sons must return to their fathers. In this respect it is true that the protesting students of the sixties have become the "inheritors" of today--two-thirds of social wealth is now to be found in their hands. For the same reason they now respect the institutions of the state which they formerly vehemently fought, as the custodians of property.

There is an element of truth in this observation. Nevertheless, it is insufficient to explain the transformation of the Greens. In order to understand why the party dissolved without a murmur at its first big test it is also necessary to examine the evolution of its political program.

Many of those who later founded the Greens were drawn by the strike movement and national liberation movements which rocked society at the time of the student protests. A variety of political circles and groups emerged which described themselves as socialist and revolutionary, orientating themselves towards Mao, Che Guevara and other heroes of the epoch. In the middle of the seventies this movement began to ebb, as the working class suffered a number of bitter defeats and the bourgeoisie went on a global counteroffensive. The initial enthusiasm of these forces gave way to deep frustration and a complete lack of political orientation. A period began in which political standpoints and convictions were thrown overboard without any serious reflection.

Under these conditions, at the end of the sixties, the Greens emerged as a political party. Not only did they reject the class struggle as a means of politics, they also rejected the standpoint that political programs are the expression of social interests. Environment, peace and democracy were the foundation of their program--and such aims could be realised without challenging the existing property relations. When, a few years later, Gorbachev discovered that "human rights" were more important than class questions, he was only reiterating something the Greens had been preaching for years.

According to the Greens politics must be pledged to a higher ideal: moral values! However, the moral values of a party are a product of the social and historical interests which the party represents. When such values are separated from distinct social interests they become merely a cover for policies lacking any orientation, and which can be moulded and determined by the ruling forces in society when the time is ripe.

In his famous text "Their Morals and Ours" Leon Trotsky illuminated the connection between general moral values which appear to stand above politics and a form of politics limited to the most elementary form of common sense: "In a stable social

environment, sound common sense is sufficient to be able to do business, to heal the sick, write articles, lead trade unions, vote in parliament, get married and reproduce. But when the same sound common sense attempts to step beyond its given limits into the territory of complex generalisations, then such common sense proves to be nothing more than an accumulation of prejudices of a certain class in a certain epoch."

So it came about that at the beginning of the eighties the Greens entered the German parliament bearing flowers, full of hopes for reform and improvements, with the intention of humanising politics and society. In the long years of opposition to the Kohl government and under conditions of growing social stagnation they won growing influence. However barely had the political tides changed, with the political ebb supplanted by a stormy flood shaking up all the customary social relations, the Greens proved themselves to be fully unprepared. Many of the Green politicians are thoroughly overtaxed and frankly do not know whether they are coming or going, never mind what way they will decide tomorrow.

The war increasingly shows its true face. It is not about "humanitarian interests", but rather naked imperialist interests, the drafting of a new world order, in which smaller, less developed countries are economically exploited and militarily terrorised by the largest, economically powerful countries.

Moral values operating above and beyond society have been among the first victims of the war. Following the party's fundamental rejection of the necessity of transforming social relations, the Greens now find themselves transformed by social upheavals.

Joschka Fischer, who during the Gulf War proclaimed "No blood for oil!" now resorts, after five weeks of bombing, to the most extravagant distortions to justify an unjustifiable war. The same German army, which less than a year ago was to be investigated by parliament at the instigation of the Greens for extreme right-wing activity (amongst a number of incidents, a leading German neo-Nazi officially addressed a cadre academy of the army), is now declared to be an "army of peace".

The deep-going conflicts inside the Greens also indicate the profound divisions in the social milieu from which the party arose. While a small part of the middle class has advanced itself, the majority has sunk into growing poverty induced by unemployment and cheap labour forms of self-employment.

The grotesque spectacle of the decline of the Greens represents a profound political watershed. It clears the way for a new party which does not shrink from openly acknowledging and drawing the appropriate conclusions about the class character of the war and the society which gave rise to it.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact