

SPD--a party of war

German Social Democrats' special party congress supports bombing of Yugoslavia

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The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) special conference held in Bonn last week vividly illustrated the transformation of a party, which in the past claimed to represent the interests of the socially deprived. Although the conference was overshadowed by the first war since 1945 with German participation, there was no serious criticism, not to speak of opposition, from the ranks of the delegates. As a defender of social and democratic rights, the SPD sighed its last dying breath.

The extraordinary meeting of SPD delegates in the biggest room of the Maritim luxury hotel in Bonn had been made necessary by the resignation from all political posts by the former party chairman Oskar Lafontaine. As expected, the present German chancellor Gerhard Schröder was voted new chairman of the party, with no candidate standing against him. Receiving 76 percent of the votes, he recorded the second worst vote in the more than 130-year history of the SPD. Just three years ago at the Mannheim party conference Oskar Lafontaine had been able to collect 93 percent of the delegates' votes.

The election of Schröder is the result of a rapid political decline of the SPD and will itself further accelerate this process. This trajectory was clearly visible at the party conference.

According to opinion polls it is clear that over half of the 800,000 SPD members are against the current NATO war in the Balkans, and, above all, reject German participation in the war. However this standpoint, which corresponds to a broad sentiment against the war by the German people, found no outlet at the party conference. SPD functionaries in leading positions are no longer interested in the opinion of the membership. The general alienation arising from an increasingly critical mood amongst the populace, while the political establishment moves continuously to the right, finds its sharpest expression precisely inside the SPD.

Basing themselves on opinion polls carried out in the days leading up to the party conference, journalists had referred to a "left wing" in the SPD, and at the beginning of the assembly Chancellor Schröder struck a conciliatory note. In the future, he emphasised, the SPD would "remain the home for pacifists",

but then in the same breath he declared that in the present situation--not to speak of the future--such elements would have no say. And then when a few representatives of the "left-wing" took the microphone to speak, it was clear that they really do have nothing to say.

The spokesperson for the new generation of bureaucrats, Young Socialists President Andrea Nahles, verbosely demanded a cease-fire and the creation of a "humanitarian corridor".

"Military logic", she declared, must be replaced by "political logic". Afterwards, in front of running cameras and with tears in her eyes, she described how she had spent the whole night "toning down" the joint resolution from Young Socialists and party lefts, producing in the end a resolution that was still only supported by a fifth of the delegates.

Executive Committee member Hermann Scheer expressed his doubts that NATO had fully exhausted the potential for discussions and described the lack of a UN mandate for the war as a "fundamental political mistake". Henning Voscherau, long time party chairman in Hamburg, described the rift which he experienced when confronted with two key slogans of the German peace movement: "No more wars" and "No more massacres"--both wars and massacres had to be proscribed. He went on to describe the "tragic dilemma of coming to a point where we must choose between the two slogans, which have become mutually exclusive."

At the end of the debate and to alleviate the anguish of the lefts, the figure of a priest appeared at the speaker's podium, the theologian, pacifist and veteran left Erhard Eppler. The newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* described the eerie scene:

"Silence hung over the room and some comrades realised that nothing remains as it was before. Eppler said that he would like to speak about a return to politics, something which will be decisive for the coming years. Now, however, he had to speak about the war... a man who had taken part in peace demonstrations in Bonn 20 years previously. He didn't regret that today, said Eppler--but much has changed since then.

"For the peace-lover of old is now a pensive advocate of the NATO intervention. In emotional tones Eppler appealed to the

delegates, declaring that since 1989 violence had not decreased but rather increased, but in a way which cannot not be reconciled with how we define a war. When six bandits attack a hotel, then armed police are called for. And when six hundred bandits attack a town...?"

Why this town had to be bombed Eppler did not explain. Nonetheless the delegates applauded.

The war had already gone into its third week as the party delegates met. The original arguments justifying the assault with humanitarian motives had been repudiated by the facts. NATO bombers were increasingly attacking civilian targets and the war increasingly assumed the form of a general terror campaign against sections of the Yugoslav population. Nevertheless the overwhelming majority of the delegates voted for the war.

What is one to think of a party where, on such a fundamental question, there is not a single principled voice of opposition? How will such a party and its Chancellor deal with their own people?

War accelerates all political processes, including the transformation of the SPD. Already at the end of the fifties the party had broken with its historical roots in the workers' movement and described itself no longer as a workers' party, but rather as a people's party. Now it has completed the transition into a party of big business, breaking apart social structures established over decades and defending the most immediate and narrow interests of the leading German business organisations.

The revolting spectacle presented by the so-called lefts on the issue of war at the conference makes clear that they have nothing to offer as an alternative. Their political bankruptcy was already evident in the manner in which Oskar Lafontaine threw in the towel. As the extent of the unscrupulous devotion of party functionaries to the interests of big business became clear, as well as the deep roots of these elements inside the SPD, Lafontaine took flight. He had no viable alternative.

"When one's reputation is ruined, then there is no more holding back", is a well known popular expression and sums up the development that is now to be observed in the SPD. Following the ditching of all inhibitions on the question of war, as the doubters are vigorously pushed to one side, straight-talking is on the agenda with regard to a whole host of issues, including broad cuts in social welfare, the introduction of cheap wage labour and either restrictions or the outright abolition of unemployment support.

The appointment of Hans Eichel as the government's new finance minister is symptomatic of this development. The best one can say about this man is that he is the archetypal book-keeper--a financial bureaucrat lacking the slightest political sensibility, not to speak of vision.

He takes the demands of business groups and transforms them into drastic savings and cuts in every sphere of the social state. He has not the slightest interest in the social

consequences of his actions. The only thing that interests him is that the numbers column of his book-keeping is correct.

The results of such a thoughtless policy were clear in the German state of Hessen, where Eichel led a local Red-Green (SPD-Greens) government until his election defeat two months ago. Under his rule, the one-time exemplary education system in Hessen was ruined and the social decline in the state created conditions where the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) could develop their demagogic opposition and win the election.

The finance senator of the SPD-CDU coalition in Berlin, Fugmann-Heesing, comes from the same school of Hessen SPD bureaucrats and has incurred the anger and disgust of a large part of a population in Berlin with her senseless and thoroughly anti-social program of spending cuts.

In the seventies the SPD responded to social protest with a program of social improvements and political reforms summed up by the slogan "Dare to be more democratic!" Today the party does precisely the opposite.

To the extent that opposition develops to the consequences of its politics, the reaction of the SPD is to turn to the police truncheon and the arming of the state. In this respect the real face of the new SPD is seen in the form of its interior minister, Otto Schily. Formerly, as a founding member of the Greens and a lawyer, Schily defended RAF terrorists. Now he is one of the main rabble rousers in the SPD demanding a tough law-and-order policy.

In the course of the Kosovo conflict the SPD has changed much more than its position on war. Having reached for the club with respect to its foreign policy--to terrorise the population of a sovereign state--the party has simultaneously ditched all remaining scruples regarding domestic policy. The SPD has tasted blood!

See Also:

The NATO Attack on Yugoslavia
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