

Germany: The transformation of the Greens' social policy

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For many, the Greens' support for Germany's first involvement in a military offensive since the end of the Second World War came like a bolt from the blue. For others, the fact that the Greens' leading figure, German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, displayed no scruples in hailing NATO's terrible bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, may not have come as a great surprise. But when the extraordinary party conference in Bielefeld gave its blessing to Fischer's war policy and even made it official party policy, many more were sobered.

The Greens' turn away from their former pacifism and anti-militarism to become a party of war is of a piece with the transformation the party has undergone. This is expressed in its crassest form in their present social policies. Hardly had Finance Minister Hans Eichel announced his budget with 30DM million in cuts, signalling an abrupt end to the policy of social consensus, then the Greens' own budget specialists began celebrating. Now all that is required is to ensure that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) does not bend under the expected wave of protests, was Green Party budgetary spokesman Oswald Metzger's comment.

"I am surprised and would not have believed that he [Eichel] could achieve his ambitious goal. Now we have to do the things that many people have suspected," said Metzger. The budget would not pass without disputes. There would be an "outcry" from those affected, such as pensioners, the unemployed and families with children.

For 16 years, the Greens protested against the social cuts implemented by the Kohl government. They criticised similar social policies in those states and cities under SPD rule, at least when they were not also involved in their government. All this is over and done with. In all questions concerning social, tax and economic policy the Greens can now be found on the right, neo-liberal wing of the government coalition.

This is set out in a paper entitled "Initiatives for Investment, Work and the Environment" agreed by the Greens parliamentary faction on March 23, 1999. The introduction still makes a passing reference to the fact that "The voters have set the red-green coalition a clear task. They were elected to successfully fight unemployment, to unleash reforms, to resolutely deal with the environmental challenges, and, finally, to re-affirm social justice after the cold years of Christian Democratic and Liberal rule." But a closer examination of the document reads more like a wish list from one of the German employers' federations.

The coalition has been given a "second chance" (referring to the unexpected resignation of former Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine), to "place supply and demand policies in a sensible relation." And further: "We consider ourselves to be the engine for reforms in the necessary structural changes that must be made. The perspectives of

future generations regarding questions of ecology, pension reform and state debts must be drawn into the sights of today's reforms. These are uncomfortable questions that we cannot avoid".

What the Greens understand by structural change and reforms is explained in a chapter headed "The improvement of the basic conditions for investment". This outlines the need for a rapid reform of business taxes. Only a further cut in top tax rates could send "a positive economic signal" so that "employers' representatives put a positive value on operating in Germany". To encourage medium-scale firms and new businesses, a "private risk-capital market" should be established.

The credo of the entire paper is summed up by the demand that "above all, we want the employers to be the main winners of this reform".

The entire public sector, with its burdensome administration, must be opened up to the private economy. Public administration must be reformed as a "modern service-oriented" operation. The old government is accused of "not really carrying out any demand-led policies".

The chapter entitled "New impulses for the labour market" begins with the demand for social insurance contributions to be cut by introducing pension and health "reforms", as well as an "ecological tax". This is an "invigorating argument". Too true! But only for the employers, whose ancillary wage costs will be reduced considerably. For retirees, on the other hand, pensions will be cut, the sick will have to pay more, and the ecological tax is nothing more than a new form of mass taxation that most businesses will be excluded from paying.

Under the label of "more intelligent work", various forms of flexible labour are being promoted that destroy job security. The paper states, "We need a part-time offensive in all areas of the economy". The "alliance for work" between government, employers and unions should drive forward more "annualised-hours contracts, job rotation and job sharing". New jobs "will mainly be found in the service sector, in the range from 630DM a month (part-time working limit) and 1,250DM (the lower income tax level)".

For millions of long-term unemployed the Greens are offering state-subsidised enforced labour. A new low-wage sector should be established where this could be tested. In laconic and cynical words, the Greens state, "This is why we think it would be sensible if, for the first year, only half of the value of any wages earned by the formerly long-term unemployed should be taken into account in calculating their benefit entitlements. This will save costs, help people and reduce the pressure to moonlight. We want to make the border between remunerative and unremunerative employment more flexible. These new proposals for the unemployed will also bring responsibilities to

accept such offers.”

Under the headline “The Greens have also discovered ‘shirkers’—the parliamentary faction considers experiments around the theme of low wages and unemployment”, Rolf Dietrich Schwartz in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* of June 29 reports that under the direction of the faction chairperson Rezzo Schlauch, “proposals to investigate wage subsidies for those with low qualifications in four experiments” have been elaborated and discussed.

Schwartz continues, “For the first time, the Greens are taking up an issue—the ‘work-shy’ unemployed—that was previously the province of big business and the FDP [Liberal Party].” Quoting from the Greens, he writes, “There are ‘signs that for a section of the unemployed it seems more worthwhile to remain in receipt of benefits, and if necessary to look for some small supplementary employment...’”.

The article presents the Greens’ various models for low-wage and part-time work. “A third model to ‘modernise job provision’ foresees that those in receipt of unemployment and welfare benefits can be placed in work by utilising private agencies. For this service, the agency would receive 4,000DM for each vacancy it fills. The unexploited employment potential in the service sector should be ‘activated’ by releasing incomes below the subsistence minimum.”

Where such measures lead is not hard to foresee. Mass unemployment will be used to break up the present social structures, while at the same time private employment agencies can use the predicament of the unemployed to reap handsome profits.

The pension and health reforms, which have already been largely agreed in the cabinet and represent a deep cut in the social safety net, are not only supported by the Greens, but have been largely worked out by their experts and ministers. Many proposals, for example, private old-age care that Labour Minister Walter Riester wants to introduce but has had to postpone for the present, were propagated in the Greens’ paper. The Greens are not even averse to intervening in existing labour and wages contracts. The task of the “alliance for work” is to come to an agreement regarding the “medium-term benchmark for wage and salary developments”.

This rightward turn of the Greens’ social policies is being completed so rapidly and thoroughly that even sections of their supporters cannot keep pace. Their Münster district branch, for example, sent a letter of protest to the parliamentary faction saying, “We reject these plans on professional and humanitarian grounds. We think it is completely unreasonable to force the unemployed to accept an underpaid and unqualified job. The introduction of enforced labour does not correspond in any way to the aims of our party, in which the individual’s right to self-determination has always been valued highly. In addition, the German constitution guarantees the freedom to choose one’s employment. The poorest in society are being made second-class citizens.”

The Greens Münster district executive comes to the view that “as realists in coalition politics we are used to not being able to carry out our aims on a scale we would like. However, what has happened here is something new: the parliamentary faction has agreed a policy that is diametrically opposed to the objectives of the Greens. It is especially infuriating that the parliamentary faction has rushed through a 180-degree about-turn without any discussion in the party. The paper was agreed in just two weeks under the shadow of the Kosovo war. We are angry and feel we have been deceived by our parliamentary deputies.”

Such angry and admonishing voices are becoming rare inside the Greens, and increasingly come under attack. Instead, a group that calls

itself “young” and “representatives of the second generation” has seized the initiative and has demanded a “radical clearing out of the party programme”. They hold that the present about-turn by the Greens should be codified in the party programme. On the first page of their own position paper can be read: “The time for *Burgfrieden* (social reconciliation) and compromise formulas is over—a clear decision is needed regarding the right way forward for the party in the future. We stand for a clear, power-conscious, pragmatic positioning, but also for a partial replacement of the membership”.

The almost breathtaking transformation of the Greens on all fundamental political questions has many causes. The social layer that gave rise to this party 20 years ago has itself fundamentally changed. While the conditions of life and work of a section of these middle class strata, like the great majority of working people, has become increasingly difficult, others have been able to accumulate considerable wealth. Not infrequently, their fortunes are directly bound up with the growth in the stock market.

Oswald Metzger embodies the narrow-mindedness of many Green social climbers, whose vanity is only surpassed by the sense of their own worth. The 45-year-old started his political career in the Swabian Mountains, where for a few years in the 1970s he was an SPD member. In the mid-1980s, when the Greens seemed to offer better opportunities for advancement, he changed parties. After breaking off his law studies, he was the proprietor of a typing office.

As a member of the local council in Bad Schussenried he even made it to deputy mayor, which also provided him with the lucrative position of sitting on the Administrative Board of the local Savings Bank. Since 1994, Metzger has been a Green parliamentary deputy, where he sits on the Budget Committee, the most important body. Although for a long time he was decried inside the Greens as a “neo-liberal”, today it is his big business-oriented line that sets the tone.

Metzger makes no secret of whose interests he represents: “The layers who we are addressing and who, along with the party, have now become 18 years older, are largely situated in the well-off social middle”. (*Der Spiegel*, November 2, 1998)



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