Social Democracy at the end of the century: 21st congress meets in Paris

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From November 8 to 10, 1,200 delegates met in Paris for the 21st congress of the Socialist International.

The roots of this organisation go back to the Second International founded in 1889 under the banner of Marxism. In 1914 it broke apart in the bloodbath of the First World War, because most of its sections had placed themselves on the side of their respective "fatherlands" and supported the war. After that it eked out a rather insignificant existence.

Following the Second World War it was founded anew. It relied on the social democratic parties of Europe, as well as the Israeli Labour Party, which were strongly anti-communist and espoused social reforms within the context of capitalist property relations.

In the eighties, and especially after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, it expanded into all parts of the world. It increased from some 40 parties to today's 143 full members and observers. These include both Italy's Democratic Left, which came out of the Communist Party, and the Palestinian El Fatah of Yassir Arafat, as well as numerous, often rather right-leaning parties from Latin America.

Amongst the delegates at the Paris congress were heads of state and government chiefs. In the European Union alone its member parties presently lead the government in 11 of 15 countries. Along with the French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, other speakers included German Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Argentina's newly elected President De la Rúa was also in attendance.

In view of this display of authority, it might have been expected that the last congress of the Socialist International at the close of the 20th century would express a certain measure of confidence and optimism regarding the future. Instead, it was marked by helplessness, internal division and a rapid movement to the right.

The months preceding the congress were dominated by a public dispute between the British Labour Party, under Tony Blair, and the French Socialist Party of Lionel Jospin. In Germany, the controversy ran straight through the Social Democratic Party (SPD). While Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder solidarised himself with Blair, Oskar Lafontaine, who had resigned as SPD party chairman, sided with Jospin.

At the beginning of June, Blair and Schroeder published a joint paper entitled "The way forward for Europe's Social Democrats", which repeated the empty phrases about a "third way" which have been the stock in trade of Blair. The document essentially boiled down to a rejection of the reformist concepts that social democracy had previously advanced.

The paper says that social democratic policies in the past ignored the importance of individual effort and responsibility, and social democracy was identified with conformity and mediocrity instead of outstanding performance. The road toward social justice was seen to be paved with ever higher public spending. Administration and bureaucracy were proportionally over-represented. Values such as personal performance and success, entrepreneurial drive and public spirit were relegated to a lower status than the goal of universal social protection. The defects of the market were overestimated and its strengths were underestimated, etc.

Quite in the style of neo-liberal ideologists, Blair and Schroeder espoused a stronger role for the market at the expense of the state. They demanded lower taxes on enterprises, less social expenditure, more flexible conditions of work and the direct promotion of the self-employed and small business.

The French Socialist Party (PS) regarded this paper as a provocation in two respects. It appeared on the very eve of the European elections and so cut across their own election propaganda. In 1997, the PS had come to power as a result of widespread opposition to the austerity policies of Jospin's conservative predecessor Alain Juppé. Since then it had always striven to put forward a left face, even if in practice its policies did not differ very much from those of Blair.

What weighed more heavily, however, were the document's foreign policy signals. It was interpreted in Paris as a rapprochement between Germany and England, to the

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detriment of co-operation with France. The Berlin-Paris axis is, however, fundamental to the strategy of the PS, which wants to strengthen Europe in order to counter the economic and political dominance of the US. It was, above all, this aspect of the Schroeder-Blair paper that Oskar Lafontaine emphasised. In his book *My Heart Beats on the Left*, Lafontaine writes in this regard: "No country is as dependent on the progress of European unification as Germany. We can advance European unification only in co-operation with France. For the foreseeable future, Britain will only play a special role."

In October, the PS published their response to the Schroeder-Blair paper, entitled "Towards a more just world". In it, they pledged their allegiance to social democratic traditions, the invocation of democracy and social progress, and even the "fight against capitalism".

"While the strength of the market economy is that it is an incomparable producer of wealth, it is also unjust and often irrational," they said. "Yes to the market economy, no to the market society... The more globalisation there is, the more rules are needed," was their conclusion.

The difference between Jospin's text and the Schroeder-Blair paper is more one of tone than substance. The PS is also for a tax policy that creates a favourable environment for business, they endorse the promotion of a private service sector, i.e., a low-wage sector. Nevertheless, they clearly have a different emphasis.

At the Socialist International congress, however, there was no argument over these differing documents and no political clarification. Instead, a committee chaired by former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez created a "synthesis" of the two documents, in which the opposing points of view are verbally bridged and dissolved into nebulous clichés. Even bourgeois commentators spoke of its "flexible formulations" and "rubber paragraphs".

What ultimately emerged as the "Paris Declaration" is a document of hopelessness in the face of world-wide changes that are described in the document. "Humankind," runs the first sentence, "is witnessing a new epochal change marked by the phenomenon of globalisation. The transformation of an industrial society into one dominated by information and knowledge is taking place at a pace and extent hitherto unknown in history."

The Socialist International is unable to put forward a common response to this global challenge. It pledges itself to common terms or "values" like solidarity, justice and progress, but what it means by this is interpreted differently in each country.

"Each of our parties strives for modernity, each does it in its own way, each in its own context, with its own history and political culture. And that is good," declared Jospin in his inaugural address. Schroeder added that social democrats strove for the same values, but in different ways. Socialism was no longer an article of "faith" and the secret of the left's success lay in its different national approaches.

In other words, each section of this so-called international can do what it wants, adapted to national conditions and reacting pragmatically to the pressure of the leading financial and business circles. There was not even the beginning of a common political line. As the newspaper editorials commented, the meeting was nothing more than an "informal exchange of contacts in the field of international politics". It proved incapable of offering a response to the burning social and political problems confronting millions of working people worldwide.

Despite their adaptation to national conditions—or rather because of this adaptation—the policies of the different social democratic parties look increasingly similar. Globalisation does not leave any room for social concessions within the national framework, and the defence of the so-called national interest in the struggle for global competitiveness inevitably requires that the social democrats advance essentially the same policies as their conservative opponents: social and welfare cuts, and labour "flexibility". The PS is not an exception in this regard. "What sounds so different, is in everyday life rather similar", commentated one congress participant.

The congress elected Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres as its new chairman. He replaced Pierre Mauroy, who took over from Willy Brandt in 1992. Brandt had headed the Socialist International for 16 years.

Guterres personifies the opportunist character of the organisation that he now heads. A convinced Catholic and opponent of abortion, Guterres began his career in the Catholic student movement. Immediately after the fall of the Salazar dictatorship, he joined the Portuguese Socialist Party in 1974, where he is considered a man of the right. In 1995 he was elected Prime Minister for the first time. Pursuing a free-market liberal economic policy, he created the prerequisites for Portugal to enter the European Monetary Union. In the East Timor conflict, he has worked intensively to promote the interests of the former colonial power, Portugal.

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