The decline of the German Social Democratic Party

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The loss of support suffered by the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Greens coalition in their first year in office is unique in post-war German history. Disastrous losses in the European, state and local elections, and weeks of demonstrations in the new capital of Berlin by public service workers, pensioners, the unemployed and farmers, have shown the enormous degree to which the government has discredited itself in just a few months.

What are the causes of this? Is it a conjunctural development, or does it express a long-term tendency? Does the end of the twentieth century, dubbed by some the “social democratic century”, also mean the end of social democracy?

Attempts to attribute the problem merely to the “outward appearance” of the government can hardly be taken seriously. Such assessments come from journalists, economic spokesmen and politicians who last year enthused about SPD Prime Minister Gerhard Schroeder's talk of a political “neue mitte” (new centre), and were subsequently offended to find that the government won its victory mainly due to promises of social reform. Since then they have tirelessly denounced the government for not having broken its election promises quickly enough. They regard the voters as a stupefied, infinitely pliable mass and reduce every political question to a problem of public relations.

Those who say it is the disappointment of the voters, who had hoped for greater social justice from the new government, which is responsible for the decline of the SPD and Greens are closer to the truth. Since his resignation as SPD party chairman, Oskar Lafontaine has appointed himself the spokesman of such a view. He accuses his successor, Schroeder, of leading the party along the wrong path, and insists that Schroeder does not understand "how and why we won the federal elections". Lafontaine finds it hard to explain, however, why he supported Schroeder for so long and why his only reaction has been to resign his political posts.

The fact that Lafontaine has, nevertheless, raised a sore point is shown by a study of the Allensbach Institute, which is politically close to the Christian Democrats. It concludes that there can be no talk of "classical social democratic ideas being out of fashion in the population. A strong welfare state, a social network and ideals of equality are highly valued within the general population.... A relative majority is convinced that a country can develop better, not only when equality of opportunity is afforded, but when equality of outcome is also sought. The growing criticism of the government cannot be attributed to the fact that classical social democratic concepts have lost their attraction in the population."

In the end, Lafontaine's statements do not explain the deeper causes for the decline of the Social Democrats. He implies that a return to the SPD's election promises of last year, or to the policies of the government's first months in power, would resolve the crisis. He limits the problem to a defence of the SPD programme, presenting himself as its guardian, while accusing Schroeder of defecting to the camp of neo-liberalism. For Lafontaine, the question of how far Schroeder himself is a product of the social democratic programme does not arise at all. If one considers the crisis of the SPD in the light of its history, it soon becomes clear how fallacious Lafontaine's conceptions are.

At the end of the last century the SPD was shaken by a controversy that proved to be decisive for its further development. It went down in history as the "revisionism debate". It concerned the question of whether the function of social democracy consisted (in the words of Rosa Luxemburg) of "the futile attempt to mend the capitalist order" or "a class struggle *against* this order, to abolish it".

Theoretically, the revisionists, who argued for a reconciliation with the existing social order, were in the minority. They were regularly outvoted at party congresses. But the practice of the party operated in their favour, and finally they won the upper hand.

The practice of the SPD moved inevitably within the framework of the existing order. The opportunity to overturn an obstacle in a stormy assault or conquer a hostile position never arose in Kaiser Wilhelm's empire. The Social Democrats limited themselves to extending the influence of the party by dogged, detailed work. This shaped the character, and, above all, the psychology of its rapidly growing body of functionaries.

When in 1914 the outbreak of the First World War suddenly confronted the SPD with the alternative of either defending its political principles and taking a stand against the war, or adapting to the pro-war euphoria, it decided for the latter—and voted in parliament to grant the Kaiser his war credits. The parliamentary group justified this with the words: "The culture and the independence of our own country must be guaranteed. In the hour of danger, we will not abandon the Fatherland."

The "culture" was at that time the Prussian military boot; "independence" meant a hatred of the French and a desire for colonial possessions; the "Fatherland" was Krupp, AEG and the Deutsche Bank.

Sobered by the war, millions of workers broke with the SPD in the following years and turned to the German Communist Party (KPD), which they expected to abolish the capitalist order. They were bitterly disillusioned when the KPD was sucked into the degeneration of the

Soviet Union and then, under the increasing influence of Stalinism, pitifully failed in this task.

The SPD, for its part, did not desist from demanding the "defence of the Fatherland". From then on its face was shaped by a mixture of patriotism, trust in authority, and love of order, combined with an hysterical fear of any intervention from below by the masses. They reacted far more strongly to the accusation made by the conservative right that they had “stabbed” the German army in the back, than to the indignation of the hungry masses. They went so far as to form a pact with the *Reichswehr* (imperial army) and the reactionary *Freikorps* (volunteers) to defeat the revolutionary uprisings of the post-war period and, in 1919, murder the revolutionary leaders—Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Their social base was composed of government officials, administrative staff and better-off workers, who identified with state and Fatherland, and regarded any danger to the existing order as a threat to themselves.

The SPD responded to the rise of the Nazis by clinging even more strongly to the state. They supported Bruening's emergency decrees and the election of Hindenburg as *Reichspraesident*, who in turn appointed Hitler as chancellor. "A mass party, leading millions, holds that the question as to which class will come to power in present-day Germany, which is shaken to its very foundations, depends not on the fighting strength of the German proletariat, not on the shock troops of fascism, not even on the personnel of the Reichswehr, but on whether the pure spirit of the Weimar Constitution (along with the required quantity of camphor and naphthalene) shall be installed in the presidential palace," wrote Leon Trotsky, characterising the attitude of the SPD.

The party discredited itself so badly that after the Second World War even the Allies considered its renewed ascent improbable. "Many German workers obviously blame the Social Democrats' policy of appeasement during the Weimar Republic for the ascent of the Nazis, and for this reason do not seem to welcome their return to power," an American government document noted in 1944.

However, the Allies had not counted on the obstinacy of the SPD, embodied particularly in the person of Kurt Schumacher, the party's first post-war chairman. An invalid whose health was broken by 10 years in the concentration camps, Schumacher sacrificed his life for the reconstruction of the party. A passionate patriot and anticommunist, Schumacher understood himself to be the guardian of German interests against the Allies. He contributed crucially to re-establishing the German state after the war, salvaging as much of the old *Reich* as possible. He prevented any rapprochement between the SPD and KPD, opposed shifting the Polish/German border west to the line formed by the rivers Oder and Neisse, and argued for a "strong, central state power".

The initial beneficiaries of his efforts were the conservatives, who provided the first three federal chancellors—Konrad Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard and Kurt Georg Kiesinger. Only in the 1960s was the SPD carried into government for the first time, on a wave of youth and working class protest. In 1966 they became junior partners in the “grand coalition” headed by the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union. Then, in 1969, Willy Brandt became the first SPD chancellor in the “small coalition” government with the Free Democratic Party.

In the Brandt era the SPD came closest to realising its espoused goal of a “social market economy”, i.e., a reformist policy of placing certain constraints on the capitalist market in the interests of class peace and social consensus. Wages and social security benefits rose, government programs in the areas of education, social welfare and health were expanded. The rebellious youth found work in the public services and broader social layers gained access to the universities. But even in this period, concerns over state authority and order dominated the thinking of the SPD. This was shown in their support for emergency laws and the *Berufsverbot* decree, which banned the employment of "radicals" in the public service.

In retrospect, this period in many ways represented an exception. The improvement of the social position of the bottom social layers was attributable less to the initiatives of the SPD than to an international offensive of the working class, which even more conservative governments in other countries were unable to oppose. Moreover, this period corresponded to the end of a post-war boom, which had above all profited big business. Without directly endangering the functioning of the capitalist economy, there was a certain room for manoeuvre in the distribution of society's wealth.

With the onset of an international recession at the beginning of the seventies, the calls for an end to these policies grew ever louder, to which the SPD adapted itself. Brandt, who had proved unable to restrain the expectations which the broader electorate placed in him, was replaced by Helmut Schmidt as SPD leader and chancellor in 1975. Schmidt adopted a course of harsh austerity measures, driving up unemployment. This policy was continued by his successor, Christian Democratic leader Helmut Kohl, from 1982 onwards. The results today are over 4 million unemployed and the impoverishment of broad social layers, with the accumulation of scandalous levels of wealth at the pinnacle of society.

Under Oskar Lafontaine's chairmanship, the SPD was again able to channel the widely felt need for social justice to its own benefit, culminating in last year's election victory for the SPD. But from the beginning, expectations that the elections meant a return to the reformist politics of the early 70s were built on sand. The entire international framework has changed fundamentally since the Brandt era. Economic life is controlled by transnational corporations and financial establishments, which stamp political life with their mark.

Traditional social-democratic reformist politics are unable to oppose this concentrated power of capital. In order to stand up to this, it is necessary to mobilise the mass of the population against the prevailing structures of power and ownership. A party like the SPD, which for decades has defended bourgeois order, is neither able nor willing to undertake such a struggle.

The present crisis of the SPD expresses the fact that the course it took 85 years ago has reached its end. Lafontaine raises many justified criticisms against Schroeder, but his own conceptions lie completely within the bounds of traditional social democratic policy. What drives him, as he writes, is the fear that "radical parties may gain ground" if the social democratic governments of Europe do not provide an alternative policy to neo-liberalism.

For the working class, the decline of the SPD places on the agenda the construction of a new political party based upon the internationalist and socialist principles which the SPD abandoned nearly one hundred years ago.