

# The dispute in Germany over the generation of '68

Peter Schwarz  
13 March 2001

*The following is the editorial from the new issue of Gleichheit(Equality), the German-language magazine published by the PSG (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

“The campaign against Fischer, Trittin and others is more than a campaign. It is the revolt by conservative forces in the republic against what is regarded as a left-wing government. At the same time it is a revolt against the identity which this country won after 1968. It is a struggle against civilising processes in this country, against liberty and tolerance.” This was the comment by journalist Heribert Prantl in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* of January 25.

One can agree with what is said here. The '68 protest movement was characterised by its democratic convictions. It questioned the authority of the state, swept away the stench of the Adenauer period and took up seriously Germany's Nazi past for the first time. Following 1968 the social climate in Germany was markedly more liberal and tolerant than before '68. This is a thorn in the flesh for all those who are now straining to publicise the already well-known past of Fischer, Trittin and others. They prefer to turn back the historical clock.

Nevertheless, Prantl has failed to grasp the essence of the issue in his commentary. The Green party is absolutely no obstacle to the turning back of the clock. The elevation of the party of former '68 radicals to the highest positions of power has not made the German state any more liberal and tolerant. Instead, the Greens themselves have become increasingly anti-liberal and intolerant. The '68ers have not conquered the state, the state has overwhelmed the '68ers.

The so-called “long march through the institutions” has proved to be a long march towards the right, deserting along the way the democratic principles that at one time characterised the movement. Since entering into a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), this turn to the right by the Green party and the government as a whole has taken place at a breath taking pace. Today the Schröder-Fischer coalition is more right-wing than its predecessor, the conservative coalition led by Helmut Kohl. It is now a “Red-Green” coalition that is carrying out the “spiritual and moral turn” announced by Kohl in 1982, but never realised under his government.

The first overseas military offensive by the German army, in Kosovo, not only brought about changes abroad, it also had profound domestic consequences. Under Social Democratic Interior Minister Schily, himself a former Green, the powers of the

police and Federal Border Guard have been extended, while repressive measures against refugees and those seeking exile have been intensified. A Green health minister has introduced fundamental measures to establish a two-class health system, and a Social Democratic labour minister and former trade union official has imposed drastic reductions in pensions. Unemployment and poverty have reached catastrophic levels, especially in the east of the country. The latest measures announced by the government with great fanfare, the so-called “environmental turnaround” in agriculture, will result in worsening nutrition for the broad masses, who will be unable to afford adequate food as prices rise.

If this is the balance sheet of Red-Green policies, then the question arises: why is there a campaign by conservative elements against the Greens?

The originators of the campaign come from the extreme right of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and sympathising elements in the media. They bear the stamp not so much of the Adenauer period, as that of the succeeding period of the '70s. The main rabble-rousers, such as Hesse state President Roland Koch, joined the CDU at a point when the overwhelming majority of their contemporaries were inclined to the left. They are right-wing fanatics, and not confused adherents of Catholic social teachings, such as one still finds among the older party members.

Ideologically they are close to the extreme right wing of the Republicans in the US, and have undoubtedly received fresh impetus by the recent Republican take-over of government. The Republican campaign against President Clinton, which culminated in the impeachment proceedings of 1998-99, played an important role in fostering an atmosphere of hostility toward anything that smelled of liberalism.

The campaign was directed against Clinton, who himself repeatedly capitulated to the right, but the more basic target was the democratic rights of the broad masses. The gulf between rich and poor has widened to such an extent that it can no longer be bridged by democratic means. In the meantime, the Republicans, representing the most rapacious sections of big business and supported by the most backward sections of the middle class, have taken over the White House with methods that clearly violate American democratic traditions.

The right wing in the German CDU are pursuing a similar course. Their campaign against the Greens is aimed not just at the advances introduced by the '68 movement, but at the democratic rights of the population as a whole. This takes a particularly

virulent form in Germany, which lacks any genuine tradition of bourgeois democratic rights and where only the working class can look back on a history of struggles for such rights. The first real taste of the new methods to be employed by the CDU right-wingers came with the racist campaign against dual citizenship launched two years ago by Koch in the Hesse state election campaign.

At the moment such right-wingers constitute a minority—both inside the party and within the media. The campaign against Fischer has met with little response from the broad public. According to official opinion polls, Schröder and Fischer still occupy the top spots as favoured politicians.

A large part of the political establishment and the press, including sections of the conservative press, have thrown their weight behind Fischer. In the case of the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a traditional flagship of conservative layers, the editorial board was split. Co-editor Hugo Müller-Vogg, a close confidante of Roland Koch, was forced to leave the paper after complaining about “media protection” of the foreign minister's flank. Those circles in politics and business that set the tone in Germany are still hesitant to break with political methods that have made possible the longest period of stability in the turbulent history of the country.

But it does not have to stay that way.

The ace in the hole of these right-wingers is the cowardice of Red-Green officeholders, who react to every attack by retreating even further. Fischer, Trittin, Schröder and company have responded to every thrust from the right with apologies and statements more openly distancing themselves from their own past. A perfect example of their behaviour—but by no means the only example—is their response to the so-called Mescalero Affair, for which Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin has taken a hammering.

In 1977 the student union of the university of Göttingen published an obituary of State Attorney Siegfried Buback, who had been murdered shortly before by Red Army faction members. The anonymous author of the piece, who used the pseudonym “Göttinger Mescalero”, distanced himself from the murder and terrorist methods. However, because he criticised Buback and wrote of a “secret pleasure” over his death, the article rapidly became the target of hysterical attacks and persecution. Its distribution was banned and it was made the subject of legal proceedings. As a consequence, 48 professors from Göttingen and Hannover decided to publish a document containing a full version of the article in order to publicise the opinions of the author and protest against the suppression of free speech. They quickly themselves became the target of disciplinary measures.

At the time Jürgen Trittin was studying at the same university and was a member of a Stalinist organisation, the Communist League. He had nothing directly to do with the article in question and was not even a member of the students union. Only a year later did he apply for membership. His only “crime” was to speak out in favour of the 48 professors and in defence of free speech.

But last January Trittin declared that his reaction at the time constituted a “grave mistake”.

Prior to Trittin's confession to the press, Chancellor Schröder had advised him to “clear up the issue once and for all”. Schröder

himself said nothing about the incident, although he had every right to do so. As a young lawyer he had defended the 48 professors who were brought to trial because of the affair, and he had held his ground on the issue of free speech. This has been confirmed by the defence lawyer, Heinrich Hannover, who headed the legal firm where Schröder was employed.

The fact that Schröder and Trittin no longer defend the position they took in 1977, when they supported free speech, speaks volumes about their shift to the right. One can expect no serious opposition on their part to the current offensive being waged by the CDU right-wingers. According to the *Spiegel* magazine, Fischer was on the brink of resigning in January this year and thereby handing over the reins to the right.

There is an objective basis for this cowardly and defensive reaction. The old political foundations of the German Republic have over time become more and more fragile: undermined by the changes that have taken place over the past 10 years—German reunification, the end of the Cold War, and globalisation. The demands of the global market are incompatible with a policy of social compromise; Germany's emergence as a world power is incompatible with a policy of balancing between divergent social interests.

In 1998 sections of business threw their weight behind Schröder and Fischer as it became clear that the Kohl government was incapable of imposing the changes they deemed necessary. The Schröder government has not disappointed them, although this has not taken place without conflict.

However, since the departure of Finance Minister Lafontaine and the agreement on the part of the Greens to both the war in Yugoslavia and the consensus on atomic power, the work of the government has proceeded relatively smoothly. Close relations between the SPD and the trade unions, and between the Greens and the peace movement, have helped to dampen popular protest.

Nevertheless, this mechanism is increasingly losing its effect. Two years ago state elections in Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia demonstrated that the base of the SPD was breaking up. The repeated policy flip-flops of the Greens have undermined the base of that party as well. *Der Spiegel* magazine recently ruminated: “That is Joschka Fischer's dilemma: after having played so many roles, always with complete conviction, both friend and foe regard him as capable of anything—and therefore do not trust him at all.”

The only thing that enables the Red-Green coalition to stay in power is the deep crisis of the CDU. But this will not last forever. The attacks being made by the Red-Green government on the welfare state and democratic rights are opening an avenue for the right wing. Their offensive can only be countered by an independent movement of the working class.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**