

Germany: Green party moves further to the right

Dietmar Henning
23 March 2001

The most remarkable feature of the recent Green party congress in Stuttgart was that almost no discussion took place. All disagreements and conflicts had been settled in advance. What remained were clichés. Following the innumerable political twists and turns this party has carried out, it has become a master at churning out meaningless phrases and formulaic compromises. What was sold as “unanimity” was the absence of any political debate.

In the past, disputes at Green party congresses were often vehement and passionate, although usually conducted on a very low level. At last year's congress in Bielefeld, a large security presence was employed to protect the delegates against pacifists and anti-war demonstrators who were protesting loudly against the party's support for the Kosovo war. Green Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer even had paint thrown on him.

But this year's congress was completely different. The Greens presented themselves as a party of state that fits seamlessly into German political operations, and in view of a sinking membership and a significant loss of votes in the last state elections, one that is concentrating on clinging to power.

For anyone inside the Greens who still retained his critical faculties and held out the prospect for a progressive solution to society's great problems, the party's support for the Kosovo war—the first use of the German army in war since the defeat of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*—was the last straw.

Stuttgart was the congress of a transformed Green party, conducted with the same media antics as the other parties, to try and sell policies that mean ever-deeper social cuts and more audacious attacks on democratic rights. The Greens' conference was thus indistinguishable from those of any of the other parties represented in the *Bundestag* (parliament). The well-known political monotony—only this time in green.

Over the past two years, during which the Greens have governed Germany together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), their political transformation has continued to accelerate. In quick succession, they have bid farewell to all the programmatic points and positions with which they attracted their supporters for 20 years. Whether the issue be “social justice”, opposition to nuclear energy or “peace and security”, the Greens have not only abandoned their former positions, they have adopted diametrically opposed policies.

Above all in Stuttgart they emphasised their role as a stabilising factor. One of the position papers from the party's Basic Values Commission that was discussed at the congress states: “As successful modernisers, we have created the foundation for alliances in favour of broad social reforms. Today we find partners, where decades ago there were only opponents.”

It says of the 1999 Balkan War: “Following our experiences with the Bosnia intervention, the Kosovo war and many other conflicts since the end of the Cold War, we say on balance: We are not giving up the aim up of freedom from violence.”

This political orientation—which also endorses cooperation with the Christian Democrats—has left little remaining of the party's old base. Since

joining the federal government, the Greens have suffered heavy losses in all the state and local elections. Membership is decreasing significantly, by around a fifth. Some reports from the local party branches speak of a complete change of the membership, with the older members being replaced by new people from other social layers, for the most part careerists and the better-off.

The widespread political alienation that all the parties confront in the general population is clearly visible in the Greens. In view of the forthcoming state elections in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wuerttemberg, those directing the Stuttgart congress tried to recall “old visions” in order to keep hold of the party's traditional clientele.

To this end, some resolutions were passed purely as window dressing and were not taken seriously by anyone, least of all the Greens themselves. This category includes a resolution calling for the annulment of the 1993 compromise on asylum, which, although keeping the right to asylum on Germany's statute books, effectively abolished it in practice. At that time, under the Christian Democratic government of Helmut Kohl, backed by the votes of the SPD opposition in the *Bundestag*, it was determined that all refugees who came to Germany from “safe third countries” could be refused entry directly at the border. This has since been carried out repeatedly, since all countries bordering Germany have been declared “safe third countries”.

The 1993 measure could only be overturned by a two-thirds majority of the *Bundestag*, an unlikely prospect, at least in the near- or mid-term of German politics. It is remarkable that the resolution calling for the 1993 measure to be reversed, notwithstanding its largely ceremonial function, was only narrowly accepted (188 to 170) by the congress.

A resolution passed by the delegates calling for a severing of the mandates of those holding ministerial office from those serving as *Bundestag* deputies served a similar purpose. It remains unclear, however, what is intrinsically undemocratic about a cabinet minister simultaneously being a parliamentary deputy. In other countries, holding a seat in parliament is a condition for occupying a ministerial position. At least then an entrant like Economics Minister Werner Müller (non-party), who has never faced an election, would not be able to simply swap his CEO's seat at a large-scale enterprise for a ministerial portfolio.

In the past, the Greens argued vehemently about the separation of official positions and parliamentary mandates. At that time, however, it concerned the separation of party office and political mandate. The attempt was made using administrative measures, such as rotating officeholders, to prevent any one person amassing several official positions and the consequent development of a caste of exclusive professional politicians.

The result is well known. In hardly any other party does the rank and file, insofar as it still exists, have so little influence on the political decisions of the party leaders as in the party that always placed such emphasis on its “rank-and-file democratic principles”.

This is because, in the final analysis, the political programme shapes the

internal regime and organisational structure of every party. A programme that is directed towards strengthening the existing social order will always lead to the holders of senior government posts determining the party line. This is how the laconic response by Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer should be understood, when he responded to journalists' questions about the decision to separate ministerial office and parliamentary mandate by saying, "Time will tell."

Or does the separation of ministerial office and parliamentary mandate have another purpose: so that if a minister has to give up his or her *Bundestag* seat, another Green careerist can step into a high-paying position and the Green gravy train moves on?

Press reports pointed out that Joschka Fischer played only a background role at the party congress. However, psychological speculations about the Greens coming out of the "shadow of the overlord" are very wide of the mark. First, today's Green party is a result of the fact that the Fischer wing has asserted itself against all comers. The Greens are the Fischer party. Because this process is complete, Fischer can limit himself to pulling the strings in the background, and to some degree has even become dispensable.

Second, the Greens are reacting to the aggressive campaign against Fischer by the right wing. They are intimidated and scared in the same way as he is, and consider their task to lie in stressing their unrestricted loyalty to the state and continually distancing themselves from their "youthful sins". There was not a single delegate who dared to strike back at the attacks of the right wing in any serious fashion.

More than mere cowardice lies behind this. Rather, the Greens sense that the right-wing attacks are only superficially directed against Fischer & Co. In reality, they are aimed at the fundamental democratic rights of the general population.

In view of increasing economic difficulties and growing social tensions, the Green officials regard democratic rights with mixed feelings. The more the resistance develops from below, the more the Greens call for a stronger state and the more deeply involved they become in restricting democratic rights. Despite the attacks by the right wing, they see the Christian Democrats as potential allies.

In order to conceal this further rightward turn, the delegates elected a new party chairperson by a large majority; someone who in the past always defined herself as "coming from the left wing". With 92.5 percent of the vote, Claudia Roth, a former manager of the rock band "Ton, Steine, Scherben" (Clay, stones, shards), obtained a result that was unusually harmonious for a Green party congress. As the chairperson of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee, she had not infrequently publicly criticised the inhumane immigration and refugee policies in Europe and also in Germany, including those of the "Red-Green" coalition government. But since her nomination as the second executive committee spokesperson alongside Fritz Kuhn, she has proved her political pliancy.

For weeks, she negotiated with local Green federations in Lower Saxony, which had opposed Green Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin's endorsement of "castor" nuclear waste transports. Although nothing has changed regarding the dangers posed by the transport of highly radioactive fuel rods through densely populated areas, no discussion took place at the party congress on the subject.

Naturally, according to Green leaders, "demonstrations can take place". These, however, must not be against the government, but rather for it, since it wants to abandon nuclear power.

In reality, the resumption of the castor transports, which had been stopped under Trittin's predecessor, Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union, is part of the "nuclear consensus" agreed last summer. This represented the interests of the nuclear power operators and guaranteed the continued existence of a majority of the nuclear power plants for the next 30 years.

The compromise formula, declared to be worthy of Solomon, was summarised in a congress resolution under the heading "Carrying through the abandonment of atomic energy". It contains the following formulation: We "follow ... a simple guiding principle: We will not call for actions, demonstrations or blockades that are directed against the nuclear consensus [of the federal government]. However, Greens will participate in demonstrations called on the basis of this atomic consensus for the fastest possible abandonment of atomic energy."

The greatest media star at the congress beside Claudia Roth was Renate Künast, who only a few weeks ago became a minister in the federal government, taking over the Ministry of Agriculture. Her way of getting down to things, appearing with a pitchfork in hand, and her demand for a "total reversal" in agricultural policy in view of the disquiet in the population arising from continuous meat scandals—BSE/Mad Cow Disease, swine fever and now the foot and mouth epidemic—drew much attention.

It is now clear that the decision taken by Chancellor Schröder at the beginning of the year to transfer control of the Ministry of Agriculture to the Greens and rename it a consumer protection ministry was above all directed at stabilising his Green party coalition partners.

While Renate Künast uses her new office to present herself and the Green party as the champions of ecological farming, as well as animal and consumer protection, behind the clichés about transforming agriculture lurks something very different.

On the one hand, the Red-Green government is using the BSE crisis to implement massive cuts in subsidies to the agricultural sector so as to conform to the global market in agricultural commodities and prepare for the expansion of the European Union to the East. On the other hand, a drastic increase in food prices is being prepared. In future, those who want to maintain a healthful diet will have to pay dearly. At every opportunity Künast is already stressing: "Good agricultural products have their price."

Following the tax reforms in the interest of the rich, a pension reform that has left many old people in dire straits, and the preparation of a health reform introducing a two-tier health service, comes the "ecological" reform of food production. Good and healthful nourishment will become a privilege for the better-off, while the vast majority will have to satisfy themselves with junk food.

See Also:

Election results in Hesse

Right wing in German CDU senses new opportunities
[23 March 2001]

The dispute in Germany over the generation of '68
[13 March 2001]

Germany: State attorney launches investigation of Foreign Minister Fischer
[27 February 2001]



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact