

German Greens vote to support the war in Afghanistan

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At its national conference November 24/25, the Green Party voted by a large majority to support the participation of German troops in the “war against terrorism”. More than two-thirds of the 700 conference delegates voted in favour of a resolution proposed by the party executive, ratifying the decision made by the German parliament on November 16.

The conference vote was regarded as a demonstration of confidence in German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who had previously made unmistakably clear that a rejection of the motion would mean the end of the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition government in Berlin. The only choice open for the Greens, he said, was to decide between the alternative of taking responsibility for this necessary intervention as a party of government, or “to leave” altogether.

Two and a half years ago at its Bielefeld conference, the Greens voted by a clear majority in favour of German participation in the war against Yugoslavia. After the latest decision in favour of the Afghan war there can be no doubt where the party stands on the issue. The party that originally described one of its main tasks as being the prevention of war, now sees “one of its hardest challenges being to formulate Green conditions in a war”, as Fischer said.

Once again the pacifist wing of the party proved its complete inability to oppose this development. On the contrary, the pacifists in the Greens played an important role in integrating critical voices into the mainstream of the party and so act to counter opposition in the German population as a whole.

The discussion prior to the vote, which lasted several hours, evoked a sense of déjà vu. Whereas in Bielefeld the debate had been characterised by vigorous polemics and conflicts at the conference in Rostock it only assumed an air of routine. Everybody was playing a pre-

rehearsed role.

Joschka Fischer both threatened and flattered the delegates, before finally posing them with the ultimatum: either you give me a free hand or I quit. Christian Ströbele, Annelie Buntenbach and other representatives of the left wing opposed Fischer and demanded “a clear No to any possible intervention by the German army in Afghanistan”. Fischer was greeted with a standing ovation. Ströbele received nearly identical applause, mainly from the same delegates who had clapped Fischer.

Later, Ströbele met with Fischer’s supporters in order to polish up the main motion to be put to the conference. Together with a concrete declaration in favour of participation in the war, the motion then also included an abstract reference to pacifism. Thanks to Ströbele, an additional sentence was included which read: “The Green Party also remains committed and bound to the tradition of pacifism.”

The conference resolution as a whole adopted the same tone. On the one hand, the motion called for the continuation of the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition, and backed the government and German parliament, which in the language of politics means assuming full responsibility for the war in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the resolution expressly praised all those deputies who had voted against the war in parliament. A key passage reads: “We expressly respect the fact that our deputies, moved as much by their sense of conscience as by political fundamentals, came to different political conclusions. Nobody took the decision lightly. We accept that a majority of our deputies voted in favour of deploying German army units in the fight against international terrorism. We regard it as appropriate that the criticism which exists regarding the intervention, which has its place in our

party, was expressed in the vote.”

This game, where everyone played his or her allotted role, was only possible because nobody raised the issue of the real aims of the current war.

The opponents of German participation, who clearly outnumbered those in the debate in favour, did not dispute that the conflict was directed against terrorism. They limited their criticism to the appropriateness of the military means used or rejected military means in principle from a pacifist standpoint. They argued that the war affects innocent civilians, breeds new hatred and encourages the development of a new generation of terrorists. There were a few isolated criticisms of the US, which in the words of Hans-Christian Ströbele, was “part of the problem” in Afghanistan, as was the case formerly in Kosovo and Macedonia.

For their part, those in favour of the war claimed that the American bombardment was a contribution to the liberation of Afghan women and the liberation of the country from Taliban domination. Or they threatened the prospect of a return to power in Berlin by the conservative and liberal parties should the conference vote against the resolution. Should the Greens quit the government coalition, Fischer warned delegates, then politics would be shaped by very different forces, “and under Haider, Berlusconi, now Rasmussen in Denmark and perhaps Stoiber [leader of the right wing Christian Social Union] in Germany” Europe would look very different.

On this basis it was possible for the various factions to remain in the same party, while at the same time ensuring that “nobody’s moral integrity was questioned”, as party chair Claudia Roth put it in her opening report. This would not have been the case if any of the delegates had sought to raise the real aims of the war.

Ten years ago, the Greens, including Joschka Fischer, demonstrated against the Gulf War with banners pronouncing “No blood for oil”. In Rostock, not a single delegate mentioned the word oil, although it is well known that a basic reason for the current war is the tapping of oil reserves in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. At the same time, there was barely any criticism of the politics of the US government. Delegates were anxious not to irritate those in power in Washington and open themselves up to the accusation of anti-Americanism—although the Bush government stands far

to the right of European politicians with whom Fischer sought to intimidate party delegates.

The raising of such issues would have quickly made clear that the war in Afghanistan serves neither the struggle against terrorism nor the return of democracy to a devastated country. In reality it is the first step towards a violent re-division of the world between the Great Powers, which will, as US President Bush has made abundantly clear, be inevitably followed by further wars. A compromise regarding participation in such a war is out of the question; this is why the Greens dodged the issue at their latest conference.

As a result, the conference was able to preserve the governing coalition as well as the unity of the party, for the time being. However, they are unable to bridge the deep gulf that exists between the party and broad layers of the population, including many who formerly voted for the Greens. At the very latest, the general election due in nine months time could signify the political end of the party.



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