

German government signals support for Iraq war

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Prior to the new year the German government, a coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, definitively abandoned its previous posture of categorical opposition to a war against Iraq. When asked by *Spiegel* magazine whether Germany would vote against such a war in the United Nations Security Council, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) replied, "This cannot be decided in advance, because nobody knows how and under what circumstances the Security Council will deal with this issue."

This statement provoked angry protests within the membership of the SPD and the Greens, but Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) immediately backed his foreign minister: "One only decides on one's vote in committees when one knows the background to the decision," he told *Spiegel*.

Schröder tried to pre-empt any further discussion on the issue within his party. "There is no point whatsoever in engaging in such speculations," he said, and promised, "Germany's vote will reflect the position we put forward before and after the elections."

If this were really so, Schröder and Fischer would have to announce a clear rejection of any war resolution in the Security Council. Germany has been a non-permanent member of the Council since the beginning of January, and will head it for the month of February.

Prior to the parliamentary elections of last September, Schröder repeatedly declared his opposition to the war. At numerous campaign rallies, he described any military action against Iraq as an "adventure" in which Germany, under his leadership, would never participate. In a newspaper interview given in early September he said, "The points I put forward against an intervention remain, regardless of any decision by the UN."

This rejection of war decided the elections. Two months prior to election day the SPD was lagging far behind the Christian Democrats (CDU) in the polls. But the Social Democrats rapidly caught up after they took an anti-war stance. The SPD and the Greens ultimately won the election by a narrow margin.

Since then, Schröder and Fischer have been gradually backing off from their former position. Before the elections Schröder announced there would be "no involvement" of Germany in the war. After the elections this was amended to "no *active* involvement".

He then assured the US that, in the case of war, American bases in Germany would be available "as a matter of course" and his government would permit US war planes to use German airspace. Prior to the elections he dodged these questions.

Soon, even Schröder's rejection of "active involvement" was withdrawn. The German government pledged that its special reconnaissance tanks in Kuwait, which are equipped to withstand chemical and biological weapons, would not be withdrawn, and that

German personnel would remain aboard NATO AWACS reconnaissance planes. This meant that both arms of the German military would be actively involved in war operations. At the same time the German army is providing troops for the protection of US bases in Germany, so as to relieve German-based US troops in the event of war against Iraq.

When the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1441 last November, subjecting Iraq to intensive weapons inspections, the German government gave its full support. France has portrayed this resolution as a diplomatic success that supposedly forces the US to once again consult the Security Council before taking any military action. German Foreign Minister Fischer, on the other hand, declared in December that the resolution rendered the question of a further UN mandate prior to military action "yesterday's debate." He thus tacitly adopted the interpretation of the US government, according to which the resolution gives the US the right to launch a military attack on Iraq, without further sanction from the Security Council, if the Bush administration determines the Iraqi regime to have committed a "material breach" of any of the resolution's provisions.

The German government is now hoping that the Security Council will not be presented with a new resolution explicitly endorsing a US military strike, because such a resolution would confront it with an insoluble dilemma. If the Germans voted in favour, there would be no way for Schröder and Fischer to continue to mask the breach of their election promises, and the governing coalition could very well break apart. However, if they abstained or voted against, they would be threatened with international isolation.

It is already becoming apparent that Russia, China and France—all of which, as permanent members of the Security Council, have veto powers—will support such a resolution, calculating that they cannot, in any event, prevent the US and Britain from going to war.

French President Jacques Chirac, who had repeatedly declared his preference for a peaceful solution, took a U-turn after the new year. He publicly confirmed for the first time that France would participate militarily in a war against Iraq.

At a New Year's reception for the chiefs of staff, he called on them to get ready for "all eventualities". He noted "with regret" that the number of regions where the French army was active might increase. While he did not mention Iraq by name, nobody was in doubt about the meaning of his words. On the same day he stated in front of the diplomatic corps that, in the event of a decision by the UN, France would meet "its responsibility to the international community".

The UN Security Council, including the German government, is aligning itself with the war policies of the Bush administration. It is necessary to explain why this is so.

The overwhelming majority of the European public remains opposed to war against Iraq. According to opinion polls, two in three Frenchmen are opposed, and in Germany the anti-war sentiment that decided the election has not diminished. Despite relentless war propaganda, there is no war enthusiasm among the British or American people.

The arguments put forward by Schröder and Fischer during the German election campaign have lost none of their significance. Why is it, then, that the Bush administration is still able to prevail with its aggressive war policies?

Schröder and Fischer came under harsh attack from Washington following their criticisms of Bush's war drive during the German election campaign. These attacks from Washington were supported by the German conservatives. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), as well as the conservative media accused the SPD-Green government of jeopardizing the transatlantic alliance and landing Germany in a position of international isolation.

"Germany is losing out enormously in terms of trust and influence," the CDU spokesman on foreign policy matters, Friedbert Pflüger, told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. "If the Germans voted 'no' in the UN Security Council, possibly as the only country besides Syria, this would amount to a political catastrophe both for the NATO alliance and the common foreign and security policy of the EU (European Union)."

But why do Schröder and Fischer cave in to this pressure, and not to the pressure of the broad anti-war sentiments to which they themselves appealed quite successfully during their election campaign?

If they continued to reject the war, they would not only find support throughout the European population, but would also have a profound effect on American public opinion, which would cause considerable problems for the Bush administration. It would immediately become clear that his war policies were by no means as "popular" as portrayed by the media, a fiction that is made possible by the lack of any opposition from the Democrats. There are, moreover, differences with Bush's war policy that reach deep into the military establishment itself.

The German government would have "nothing to lose except the affection of George W. Bush," as Michael Naumann, one of the few German journalists proposing opposition to the Iraq war, put it in an editorial of the weekly publication *Zeit*. Naumann himself briefly served in Schröder's cabinet before he became editor of the *Zeit*.

Nor does the claim that Schröder and Fischer preserve the transatlantic alliance by yielding to Bush hold up under scrutiny. In fact, their capitulation is strengthening precisely that faction of the American elite that is pursuing American interests in the most violent and unilateral manner, thus undermining international relations. If the Bush administration succeeds in its campaign against Iraq, this will inevitably stoke its appetite for further military conquests and aggravate international tensions even more. In this respect, the international alliance against Iraq calls to mind the alliance formed by the imperialist countries in 1900 for the subjugation of China. Fourteen years later, they proceeded to slaughter each other.

So what are the reasons for the turnaround of the SPD and the Greens in relation to the war?

The personalities of both Schröder and Fischer play a role. Having both risen to the highest government positions from modest social backgrounds, they have an organic urge, as is the wont of social

climbers, to prove their reliability and trustworthiness to the political and economic elite. This inclination renders them particularly vulnerable to the attacks of the right-wing opposition, while they have nothing but contempt for the feelings of the people.

However, the fundamental aims of German foreign policy are more important than these personal factors. Notwithstanding its military weakness compared to the US, Germany, as an imperialist country, pursues its own economic and political interests in the Gulf.

As we wrote prior to the German elections on the sudden shift of Schröder and Fischer to vocal opposition to an Iraq war, "Washington's inclination to act without regard for allies, international institutions like the UN or international law has caused Berlin to fear for German interests."

Since the days of former chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU), Germany has been counterposing a common European foreign and security policy to Washington's drive for hegemony. On the eve of the impending war against Iraq, this project lies in tatters. The European positions range from unconditional agreement (Britain and Spain) to tactical manoeuvring (France) to nominal opposition (Germany and Greece). From this stems the fear of international "isolation", which the German government attempts to avert by adapting itself to the US in the Security Council.

The final motive for the about-face of the SPD and the Greens is rooted in domestic policies. The number of unemployed and the scale of the budget deficit have reached record levels. The economy is stagnating and the effects of a war threaten to cause violent social convulsions.

Since the national elections, the government has been under continuous attack by the right wing. It has reacted by adopting large portions of the CDU/CSU programme and declaring war on the working population through social welfare cuts, the introduction of cheap labour and attacks on public sector workers.

A government at war with its own population cannot promote peace in international politics. The war against Iraq and the attacks on the working people serve the same aim: the defence of the capitalist system, which is geared to the accumulation of profit for the rich.

The about-face of the government in Berlin demonstrates the futility of the hope that European governments or the United Nations might oppose or prevent a military strike against Iraq. This aim can only be achieved by an independent movement of the working class that unites the struggle against war with a struggle in defence of democratic rights and the social interests of the working class.



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