The German Social Democratic Party: 140 years

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Every 10 years the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) presents the grotesque spectacle of its regular anniversary celebration. On May 23, the SPD was 140 years old. No other party places so much emphasis on history and tradition—and is, at the same time, so disinterested in historical truth and in learning lessons from history.

Even a quick look at the entrance ticket to this year's festivities forced a sharp gasp of breath. Depiction of the party's ancestral line begins with a portrait of August Bebel and ends with Gerhard Schröder—and between them: Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Schumacher and Willy Brandt. What a decline! Enough to make one cry, "Hands off Bebel and Luxemburg—the great socialists!"

What is so striking about the current celebrations is that no one is in the mood for celebrating. For months, the party's chairman has been blackmailing party members to support an austerity programme, affecting all areas of society and overturning everything that the SPD formerly stood for. The state's social security schemes, which are almost as old as the SPD itself and were introduced by the first German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, as a means to cut the ground from under the feet of the fledgling SPD, are now being dismantled by a social democratic government. What an irony of history.

Just 130 years ago, Bismarck was powerless to prevent the rise of the SPD, either with the carrot of social reform or the whip of anti-socialist legislation. Now, a social democratic chancellor is demolishing state social security provision step by step, thereby inaugurating the final stage of the long political degeneration of his own party.

When a dozen or so parliamentary representatives demonstrated against this by trying to collect signatures for a survey of party members' opinions, the party executive was outraged. Franz Müntefering, leader of the parliamentary faction and former general secretary of the party, called the initiative "one big dirty trick" and threatened that any MP "who stabbed the chancellor in the back" would have to pay the consequences. Today, fundamental democratic rights are suppressed and every "deviant" intimidated in the party that in its early years had democracy and socialism written large on its flag.

Accompanied by applause from the right-wing media, Chancellor Schröder raises the question of confidence in his leadership and the threat of his resignation before every major party and parliamentary vote. Many commentators see this as a sign of strong leadership and congratulate him, but in fact the truth is quite the opposite. A party leader who can only maintain his authority by making ultimatums and threatening to resign has basically already lost his authority. Obsequious and always available for discussion with company managers and business organisations, Schröder has established an outright dictatorship within his own party and silenced all opposition.

During a speech on May 22, party leader Schröder solemnly declared that his *Agenda 2010* programme was in "the best social democratic tradition." Quite true! Since opportunism took over the party just 90 years ago, it has always gone the way of least resistance, thereby aiding and abetting the most reactionary social forces.

This is happening again today. The planned social cutbacks and the way the social democratic leadership treats the party and parliament are encouraging and strengthening the right-wingers of the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) coalition and the FDP (Free Democratic Party). The situation is reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, the anti-social policies of the government of Hermann Müller, a social democrat, paved the way for Heinrich Brüning, a centrist who then invoked emergency decrees and paved the way for the Hitler dictatorship. Even at the time, it was clear that the reduction and abolition of social, democratic and parliamentary rights, initiated by the SPD, would finally be directed against the SPD itself.

However, this party has long forgotten how to draw lessons from history or reflect on the political consequences of its attacks on social and democratic rights. That is also the case in relation to the opposition within the party. This internal opposition criticises the Schröder leadership but can offer no alternative. Oskar Lafontaine, a former SPD cabinet minister under Schröder, uses every opportunity to accuse the party leadership of betraying election promises and points out that this government is conducting a redistribution of society's wealth in favour of the rich in a manner more remorseless than any other post-war government. But what is his answer to the crisis?

As party chairman, architect of the 1998 election victory and finance minister, Lafontaine had the chance to put his words into deeds. But as soon as the business community put him under pressure, he threw in the towel and gave way to Schröder. Not only Schröder, who is well known for his readiness to read the lips of company managers, but also Lafontaine is unwilling to stand up to the business lobby. He, too, wants to avoid a mobilisation of the masses and social conflict. But he took the cowardly course of retiring from office because the neo-liberal offensive cannot be stopped without a broad mobilisation of the population.

Reminiscent of the way Karl Kautsky betrayed the principles of the revolution a hundred years ago, when party practice had long been following the opportunistic theories of Eduard Bernstein, Lafontaine today invokes the phraseology of 1970s social reformism, although the party has long been set on a course of economic liberalism. Just as in the past, the opposing tendencies in the SPD merely represent the

left and right varieties of opportunism—although reformism has also degenerated totally over the last hundred years.

No one any longer expects from this party any serious contribution to a progressive solution to major social problems. A mood of depression and morbidity dominated this year's SPD birthday party. According to the party executive, 7,283 members of the SPD left the party last month—an average of 242 each day.

The main argument of the utterly blockheaded party bureaucracy runs: If we don't do it, the conservatives will, and everything will be even worse. In view of the difficult economic situation—national and international—no other way remains but the abolition of social provisions for the weakest in society and tax concessions for the strongest and the richest.

The tax reform implemented three years ago by the current government relieved companies of tax payments amounting to 30 billion euros. Not only do many major companies not pay a single cent of tax; but taxation offices have actually been reimbursing them with millions of euros over the last two years. Rarely before has a government so openly and shamelessly acted as the rich man's bailiff in this way—and always with the argument that there's nothing else that can be done.

There could be no sharper contrast to the founding years of the SPD. In imperial Germany at that time, social conditions were far worse, but the response of the early social democrats was just the opposite: Something has to be done! Tremendous optimism and the conviction that the political and cultural education of the masses constituted the key to a better and fairer society inspired the political endeavours of the young August Bebel and other socialists of those early days.

When delegates from 11 towns and cities assembled in Leipzig in May 1863 and founded the General Association of German Workers in the presence of approximately 600 workers, the 23-year-old Bebel was only a delegate in the audience, but he was already highly regarded in the Workers Education Organisation. Six years later, he founded the Social Democratic Workers' Party together with Wilhelm Liebknecht and entered the First International.

This was the beginning of a powerful movement that soon conquered the hearts and minds of workers in the towns and the countryside. Basing itself on the teachings of Marx and Engels, the early social democracy became the catchword for the struggle for freedom and democracy.

The speeches of August Bebel gave concrete rendering to the vision of a new, higher level of society. From then on, the tone of the party was no longer to be set by exploitation and personal enrichment paired with stupidity and arrogance, but by notions of social equality, solidarity and education for all. Party membership rocketed in spite of attempts to suppress it by the Prussian authoritarian state and Bismarck's anti-socialist laws.

At the turn of the century, the sense of an imminent change towards a better future was widespread and was based on rapid developments in science and technology. However, the dynamic rise of capitalism also nourished the conditions for a rapidly growing stream of opportunism that finally engrossed a major part of the party leadership. Only a year after Bebel's death, the SPD parliamentary faction voted to accept the Kaiser's request for war expenditure in August 1914, thus leading millions of workers into the slaughterhouse of the First World War.

This betrayal had devastating consequences for the entire twentieth century. From then on, the SPD devoted itself entirely to the maintenance of the bourgeois order and saw itself as responsible for the suppression of any revolutionary change. When the Russian Revolution gave a powerful impulse to the socialist movement at the end of the war and the Kaiser was deposed in Germany, the SPD's official party organ *Vorwärts* published advertisements for the counter-revolutionary Free Corps—the paramilitary war veterans organisation that later produced many of the leading Nazis.

While the SPD's chairman and future president of the German Reich, Friedrich Ebert, cooperated with the military high command, his party friend Gustav Noske, as head of the military department, organised the bloody suppression of the Spartakus rebellion and allowed thousands of revolutionary workers to be slaughtered. The most prominent victims were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

This was followed by the refusal of the SPD to fight alongside the communists against Hitler and the National Socialists. After Hitler's rise to power, the social democratic trade union leaders offered to cooperate with the fascist regime, though this failed to save them from the concentration camps. Leon Trotsky wrote in 1932: "The most decrepit layer of decrepit capitalist Europe is the social democratic bureaucracy."

Owing to the role of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and internationally, the SPD again became influential after the Second World War. It exploited the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy to stir up anticommunist sentiment. Moreover, the post-war economic recovery seemed to back the claim that the social market economy was a successful alternative to socialism.

The SPD achieved its greatest success at the beginning of the 1970s—shortly after the post-war boom had reached its height. Since then, it has declined at an increasingly rapid rate. The end of the Cold War also heralded the final stage in the decomposition of the SPD. There no longer exists the slightest basis for politics based on class compromise and the welfare state. The new role of the United States, under whose protective umbrella social democracy had been able to carry out its reformist policies, has now made the SPD irrelevant.

August Bebel would doubtless have had nothing but scorn and derision for today's SPD with all its bickering factions and tendencies. The process of decay has advanced enormously since Rosa Luxemburg referred to the party as a "stinking corpse."

Contrary to those who regard the twentieth century as the grave of all socialist aspirations, Bebel and Luxemburg were apt to reflect that the birth of bourgeois society was also painful and took a long time. They regarded the great achievements in science and technology as proof of the enormous creative energy of humanity. And instead of moaning about the demise of a political party that has long since outlived its relevance, they would call for the working population to take up the struggle to determine its own political fate.