

German Green Party backs cuts in social programs

Ludwig Niethammer**25 June 2003**

At a special party conference of the German Green Party, held June 14-15 in Cottbus, more than 90 percent of the 700 delegates voted for Social Democratic (SPD) Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's so-called "Agenda 2010." In so doing the Greens have unambiguously backed the political course of the chancellor and cleared the way for historically unprecedented cuts in Germany's social welfare system.

No serious opposition was to be expected from this party. With their transformation from a pacifist party into a militarist one, the Greens had already made clear their lack of political principle and entirely opportunist approach to politics. Nevertheless, the ruthless manner in which the majority of the delegates rejected all social considerations and attacked the basic interests of the general population came as something of a surprise.

It is not so long ago that socially committed groups had hoped the Greens, as part of the ruling SPD-led coalition, would block the worst of the social cuts from going through. The Cottbus party conference has made clear that the opposite is the case. The Greens regard themselves as the wing of the government whose function is to make sure the SPD does not give in to pressure from below. At an assembly where the dismantling of social programs was euphemistically called "reform of the welfare state," one Green speaker after another stood up to praise the party as the "motor of reform."

All of the stock phrases used by representatives of big business and the wealthy elite to justify deeper cuts in the social sector—phrases that have been repeated again and again by the media—were to be heard at the Green Party conference.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer once again surpassed everyone else, warning the party not to "lose touch with economic and social reality." Declaring that "Even we cannot ignore the figures," he said, "Today we are discussing what the government must do, not questions of basic program." The Left must develop a dynamic economic policy, he continued, if it wants to enable the state to once more promote economic stability and growth. "Slogans like 'take from the rich and give to the poor' are not helpful here," he avowed.

Despite the crisis on the German stock market and the general economic downturn, the number of millionaires in Germany has risen significantly, reaching 755,000. This is the result of a

vast redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich—amounting to 30 billion euros—carried out by the SPD-Green Party coalition government. Nevertheless, Fischer demands further attacks on those who are socially disadvantaged.

The transformation of the Greens into a party representing the most privileged sections of the middle class could not have been expressed more graphically.

The Green Party's approval of the government's Agenda 2010 will have severe consequences for the majority of the population. The duration of guaranteed earnings-related benefits will be shortened, as planned. Unemployment benefits and income support are to be merged, and driven down to subsistence level. Regulations protecting workers against wrongful dismissal are to be loosened. The cost of statutory health insurance payments will, in the future, be borne by workers alone.

The simple and glib argument used by all Green leaders to defend Agenda 2010 is: "The coffers are empty!" They claim there is no alternative but to subordinate the interests of the vast majority to those of the corporate elite and carry out the social cuts demanded by representatives of big business. Otherwise, as a member of the Greens' executive board, Krista Sager, stated, "The social security system will be wrecked." Former party chairman Fritz Kuhn justified support for the government's program of sweeping cuts on the grounds that "otherwise, others will come forward with even more far-reaching programmes."

The minister for consumer rights, Renate Künast, said the Greens were the only party capable of driving forward the "modernisation" of society. "It depends on us," she said, adding that the German social system as a whole was in difficulty and no area could be exempt from changes.

The minister for the environment, Jürgen Trittin, declared that the privilege of reducing taxes should not be left to the CDU (Christian Democratic Union). Even if it proved necessary to supplement the Agenda 2010, that should not be a reason to leave the running of the country to those who "stubbornly hang onto their assets," he said. Leaving no room for his remarks to be misinterpreted, he made clear that he did not count among those "hanging onto assets" the wealthy upper crust of Germany.

The rhetoric could not conceal the fact that the policies of the Greens stand in complete contradiction to the social interests of the masses of the population. Objectively speaking, the Greens and their policies of “free market” economic liberalism are to the right of the CDU, and even to the right of the neo-liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party).

At the beginning of the conference, party leader Reinhard Bütikofer gave his interpretation of what was to be understood by “realistic Green politics.” He said: “The question is, are we a Left who want to change things, or are we structurally conservative. This is what we have to decide here.” Here he adopted the twisted political vocabulary of the employers’ association, the media and neo-liberal elements from the political right, who tend to describe anyone in Germany who seeks to defend the welfare state as “structurally conservative.”

Bütikofer let the cat out of the bag when, following accusations of one-sidedness, lack of balance and being too friendly to big business, he countered by declaring that, after all, the entire party executive had supported the Agenda 2010. This made clear, he said, that support for the cuts did not mean becoming a “sect-like organisation” that represented only the viewpoint of the Association of German Industry (BDI).

Bütikofer’s efforts to curry favour with the German business elite epitomised the entire party conference. The party leader went so far as to criticise members of the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) such as Horst Seehofer, who have raised objections to the government’s “orgy of privatisation.” According to Bütikofer, “The real people blocking development in this country are the conservatives.”

In the name of the entire Green leadership, the chair of the Green fraction in parliament, Kathrin Göring-Eckart, argued strongly in favour of bringing forward planned tax cuts, which are to concentrate on tax relief for the top earners.

Under the previous government, headed by conservative Helmut Kohl (CDU), the highest tax rate was 53 percent. The plan is to reduce this next year to 42 percent. This represents a tax windfall of 100,000 euros for every millionaire.

The financing of these tax measures was also spelled out by Bütikofer, who demanded the abolition of subsidies upon which working people depend: car mileage bonuses, tax relief for home ownership, etc. “Let us take on these holy cows,” he said, aping the neo-liberal FDP chairman, Guido Westerwelle.

In his closing speech, Foreign Minister Fischer made clear what he meant by opposing the right wing. He called on delegates not to shy away from taking measures merely because they were unpopular. Delegates should not “capitulate” to the right, he insisted, by ducking the implementation of “necessary cuts.” The issue, he said, was whether “we are able to implement the economic cuts instead of leaving it to the right-wing.”

Fischer’s remarks not only constitute an admission of bankruptcy, they also contain a serious warning. To the extent that the SPD-Green Party government adapts to the demands of

big business and precipitates a social disaster, it strengthens and encourages the right wing in its bid to regain power. Throughout Europe, social-democratic parties and “left” coalition governments with policies hostile to workers have prepared the way for the return to power of right-wing parties.

The final act in the drama of the party conference was provided by the veteran “left” Green politician Christian Ströbele. In line with the party leadership’s script for the conference, Ströbele strode up to play the role of rebel, the better to defuse any resistance among the “lefts.”

He came forward to speak shortly before the vote on the main motion put forward by the party executive. In order to sweeten the pill (i.e., voting in favour of the motion), Ströbele put forward a thoroughly non-committal demand for the re-introduction of wealth and inheritance taxes. The motion was carried by a majority.

The delegates were besides themselves with delight. The room was full of cheers, while party leaders pulled long faces. Now it was possible to begin the vote on the main motion, which pledged the party to support all of the appalling social measures embodied in the Agenda 2010.

Foreign Minister Fischer commented sarcastically—and accurately—that Ströbele provided a “well known pressure valve” for internal party critics to let off steam. The finance expert of the Greens, known for her predilection for neo-liberal solutions, Christine Scheel, was even more blunt: “We should thank Ströbele, because through him we got a vote we could only have dreamed of yesterday.”

At two previous party conferences, held in Bielefeld and Rostock, the Greens voted in favour of the first interventions by German soldiers abroad since the Second World War—initially in Yugoslavia and then in Afghanistan. The party conference in Cottbus signalled the demise of any lobby in the party for policies of social justice. The transformation of the Greens into a protagonist of social inequality can only serve to accelerate the party’s decline.



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