

A handshake and a cowardly speech

German Chancellor Schröder rushes to the aid of Bush

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Iraqi resistance to the US occupation of their country is growing daily. The reasons given by the US and Britain for going to war have been exposed as outright lies; and the Bush government is facing its worst crisis since coming to office three years ago. Under these conditions, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder used his attendance at the United Nations General Assembly's annual debate in New York to demonstratively back the American president.

In a 40-minute personal discussion with Bush, the German chancellor repeatedly stressed that the differences of opinion between Berlin and Washington on going to war with Iraq were a thing of the past. Now, Schröder maintained, it was necessary to look to the future, and his government was ready for a close and trusting collaboration with the US.

Schröder emphasised that the German government was very interested in the "stabilisation of relations in Iraq"—which in plain terms means German support for the military occupation and exploitation of the country. He promised financial help and repeated his previous offer of German aid in training Iraqi police and military forces.

Also attending the discussions in New York were German foreign minister Joschka Fischer and US secretary of state Colin Powell. It was the first direct discussion between Schröder and Bush in 16 months.

Following the meeting, Schröder gave an impassioned speech to the UN General Assembly in which he spoke about the need for "more international collaboration" and the "high value of international law." He refrained, however, from the slightest criticism of the flagrant breach of international law carried out by the Bush government in launching its war against Iraq.

Schröder's and Fischer's behaviour in New York has far-reaching international implications, and can only be described as politically criminal. Having formerly warned of the disaster that is now unravelling in Iraq, and under conditions in which all the claims regarding weapons of mass destruction have been revealed to be nothing less than a pack of lies, the German government is now rushing to support Washington.

Instead of using his speech to the UN to accuse Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld of carrying out an illegal war of aggression,

Schröder chose to extend his hand in a demonstration of conciliation.

In doing so he is strengthening reactionary political forces in the US and across the globe and encouraging them to undertake further military adventures. Not only has the German chancellor struck a blow at the oppressed Iraqi masses and the millions who demonstrated against the war worldwide; he has also sought to stabilise a government that is encountering growing opposition to its policies—including from inside the American political establishment itself.

At the same time, his cowardly adaptation to the Bush government only ensures that the killings on a daily basis of Iraqi civilians and American soldiers continue. If Schröder had said the truth about the war policy of the American government—that it is a flagrant breach of international law and a war crime—he would have strengthened and encouraged the growing popular opposition to the war inside America itself.

Instead, his speech to the UN assembly was full of high-sounding generalities and evasions. He praised the UN as a community of peoples and described its future with the words: "It is the way to a universal order based on law and human dignity by responsible governments, and enables participation in the wealth of the world by all of its people." One is forced to ask: How many lies is it possible to pack into one sentence? In fact, the "universal order based on law" was summarily thrown into the garbage bin with the beginning of the Iraq war, when the Bush government defied the most important tenets of international law.

The US administration refuses to recognise the International Criminal Court in The Hague, precisely because it knows its own actions are of a criminal character. And the issue of "universal human dignity" begs the question: Does this apply to the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, who are held without charges under concentration-camp-like conditions? Does it also apply to the refugees and asylum-seekers currently detained in German prisons while awaiting deportation?

The fact that the US government felt encouraged by this new tone from Berlin was already clear one day earlier, when Bush made his own speech to the UN assembly. Flying in the face of

all available evidence, he repeated his claims of a threat of weapons of mass destruction in relation to Iraq and defended his occupation of the country as a means as guaranteeing freedom and democracy.

With their actions at the UN General Assembly, Schröder and Fischer made patently clear that their initial rejection of the Iraq war was never of a principled character. Their starting point was the immediate economic and political interests of the German bourgeoisie. In the 1980s, Germany and France had become Iraq's most important trading partners, and business organisations in both countries had urged both the German and French governments to do all they could to prevent the US from undertaking its latest war against Iraq. Having proven unable to prevent the war, however, the same interests are now demanding that the US not be allowed to take over as the hegemonic power in Iraq and the region.

In particular, German and French big business are seeking to ensure that the privatisation of the major Iraqi factories planned by the US occupation authorities should not take place without them playing a role and having a share in the proceeds. In addition, they fear the repercussions on their own oil-dependent economies as Washington secures its stranglehold over Iraqi oil and gas reserves.

Behind the debates and discussions on the formulation of a new United Nations resolution on Iraq, including the differences over the timetable for elections, etc., the major powers are competing for influence in the region. All of them are prepared to undertake the colonial exploitation of a country already devastated by war and sanctions.

The heavy losses suffered in past months by German firms with extensive interests in the US are an additional economic factor in the conciliatory German stance. The multinational DaimlerChrysler has been forced to scale back its production in the US over the past period. With the German economy continuing to stagnate, there is a growing chorus demanding an improvement in transatlantic relations.

However, the fact that the German government is now prepared to demonstratively side with Bush cannot be explained merely on the basis of immediate economic interests. A number of important political factors are also at work.

First, the governments in Berlin and Paris are concerned about the threat of a complete collapse of any sort of authority in the Middle East coupled with the prospect of popular uprisings. They fear that the growing US terror in Iraq, which is currently averaging a daily toll of 60 deaths of Iraqi civilians and US soldiers, will lead to insurgency throughout the region that will prove impossible to contain.

This was why the German government abstained in the recent vote on a UN Security Council resolution criticising the call by members of the Israeli government for the execution of the elected leader of the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat. This abstention makes a complete mockery of Schröder's talk at the General Assembly of universal human dignity. The German

government demonstrated that it is prepared to support the most brutal forms of repression and violence to combat an uprising by the Palestinian masses.

Second, the German government is encountering increasing problems in relation to its policies for a United Europe. The recent massive vote in Sweden against the introduction of the European joint currency, the euro, made clear the extent of popular opposition to the path towards European integration undertaken by the major European governments in alliance with big business.

In all of the leading European countries, measures undertaken to "streamline" the country along "American" lines—the dismantling of the welfare state, the mass introduction of cheap labour combined with tax policies aimed at favouring big business and the rich—have met with widespread opposition. Intent on introducing "American conditions" throughout the continent, the German bourgeoisie is seeking to close ranks with its former Atlantic partner in order to concentrate on intensifying its attacks on social and democratic rights at home and throughout Europe.

Third, in supporting American imperialism in the Middle East, the SPD is following a long social democratic tradition of lining up with the strongest imperialist power against its own working class and oppressed nations. The appeasement and capitulation undertaken during the first half of the 20th century by German and other European social democratic parties to the forces of reaction in Germany and abroad led Leon Trotsky to comment: "The most rotten part of rotten European capitalism is social democracy."

However, it would be a mistake to think that Schröder's conciliatory stance in New York will in any way appease the appetite of American imperialism and the Bush administration. Nor will it serve to repair the rifts in the transatlantic alliance. As he made clear in his own UN speech, Bush remains determined to exclude the UN and its constituent nations from any meaningful role in Iraq.

In addition, the derogatory comments made by Bush about France in the course of his attendance at the General Assembly, together with his rather more favourable treatment of Schröder, demonstrate the readiness of the US administration to play off one major European power against another. Despite the German government's strenuous efforts to present a public image of harmony and conciliation in New York, this year's General Assembly debate made clear that differences inside the UN are rapidly reaching the breaking point.



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