

Schröder's "Agenda 2010" and his offensive against the German population

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Since his reelection in a close vote just a year ago, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (German Social Democratic Party—SPD) has threatened to resign on no less than five separate occasions. Every resignation threat has been directed against those who have criticised his "Agenda 2010" programme, which involves unprecedented attacks on the German social fabric. Barely a day goes by without a renewed and violent attack by the chancellor on opponents of his course inside his own party.

At a meeting of the SPD fraction at the end of September he warned his critics that anyone voting against his "Agenda 2010" should be clear that he or she was contributing to the possible downfall of the government. Schröder emphasised that the SPD-Green government would be finished if it was not in a position to acquire a majority inside the government camp for his "reform" agenda.

Despite his threats, six SPD deputies voted against the government in the subsequent parliamentary debate on the government's reform of the German health system. Schröder had insisted that the SPD parliamentary fraction vote in favour of the measure so that the government would not be dependent on opposition votes. In the event the government was only able to achieve a majority because a number of conservative deputies did not turn up for the vote.

Schröder and the chairman of the SPD fraction, Franz Müntefering, reacted angrily to the "no" voters inside the party. Müntefering called the rebels "cowardly" and "narrow-minded" and called upon them to give up their seats in parliament. This demand has been since then repeated on a number of occasions by the right wing inside the party organised in the so-called "Seeheim Circles."

Another important parliamentary vote is due on October 17. The vote is to decide on a package of measures, already agreed by the cabinet, aimed at the amalgamation of unemployment and social welfare payments—measures that would lead to a severe reduction in the living standards of the poorest members of society. The aim of the reform is to force long-term unemployed and the needy to accept any form of cheap labour. The tying of state support to forms of cheap labour had a precedent in Germany with the forced labour introduced in Germany during the period of the Weimar Republic.

Following the demand by a number of government deputies that their support for the package of measures was dependent on "improvements," Schröder declared to an audience of trade unionists in Hannover that there would be no changes made to the content of the reform under his leadership. He would not be at the disposal of the party for any other policy, Schröder declared, and threatened once again to resign.

One of his critics, the speaker of the "Democratic Left 21" forum, Detlev von Larcher, accused the chancellor of "intolerable attempts at intimidation." He continued that it was unacceptable that "free deputies," who according to the constitution were only answerable to the constitution and had been elected on the basis of certain very definite policy commitments, were being permanently subjected to massive pressure.

The aggression with which Schröder has sought to demolish any counter-

arguments and silence criticism is mounting all the time. The head of the parliamentary fraction Müntefering is also swinging the whip and has threatened rebels with repressive measures. His main argument boils down to "keep your mouth shut!" Increasingly the government in Berlin resembles a regime in a state of siege, lashing out wildly. Commentaries in the press are already speaking of the twilight of the chancellor (*Kanzlerdämmerung*) and an end of the world atmosphere (*Endzeit*).

The reason for this mixture of desperation and anger in the chancellor's office is not to be found in the behaviour of a few unruly deputies, who themselves use every opportunity to emphasise that they do not seek to endanger the government's majority—despite their criticisms. The problem for the government is that its policies have met with massive popular rejection.

This fact is not altered by the efforts of various opinion polls and institutions, which have continually produced new statistics to reinforce the claim that the German "public" demands more reforms and calls upon the government to demonstrate more resolve in pursuing its policies. This type of "public opinion" is a thoroughly artificial product created by the media and other opinion makers, which in fact stands in glaring contrast to the real sentiments of the broad masses of the population.

Although the trade unions have patently sought to strengthen the hand of the government and have cancelled any further protests against "Agenda 2010," growing public opposition is assuming increasingly palpable forms.

The SPD had already experienced a dramatic loss of support in elections in the state of Hesse that took place in the spring of last year. Only weeks ago the SPD experienced an even worse battering in the election held in the state of Bavaria where the SPD lost a total of 700,000 votes. Its percentage share of the vote plummeted to a record low of nearly 10 percent. It was the first occasion in postwar German history that the SPD recorded a vote share of less than 20 percent.

This is not just in Bavaria, where the SPD has played a subsidiary role in politics for some time. Even in those areas where SPD support has been highest—the working class districts of the big cities—support for the SPD is haemorrhaging in a massive way.

It is clear from another development taking place across Germany. Since the start of the year the SPD has lost more than 30,000 members. Rank-and-file members are reacting in a positive manner which is more far-reaching and significant than any other sort of protest. In the past, protest rallies and demonstrations aimed at the course of the leadership were bound up with hopes of being able to change the course of the party. Now the declarations of resignation from the party, which in many cases include political justifications, indicate that any hopes in such a change of course have been exhausted.

The news magazine *Der Spiegel* reports that many of those addressing resignation letters to the SPD stress their adherence to traditional social democratic values and then state that they no longer feel at home in a party led by Schröder and Müntefering. At the time of German

reunification in 1990, SPD membership totalled 950,000 registered members. This figure had fallen to just 664,000 by August 1, 2003, with the trend accelerating in recent months. Resignations in the first half of this year were equivalent to the total for all of 2002.

Many rank-and-file functionaries are distraught. In many regions the party has had to either close or amalgamate offices and premises. According to *Der Spiegel* a local SPD official in the western state of the Saar sought to contact by telephone those who had sent in their resignations. The response was disappointing. When it became known in the party that he was attempting to persuade former members to return to the fold a number of resignation letters ended with the blunt message: "Do not bother ringing!"

Schröder's response to growing opposition on the part of the party rank and file and amongst the population as a whole has been to trample on basic democratic conventions. His immediate reaction to the party's devastating defeat in Bavaria was to emphasise his determination to continue with his political course. On the night of the election he stressed: "There will be no other policy under my leadership." In other words: you can vote how you like but we will not change our course. And when we are not able to implement them, then others will do so.

The authoritarian tone struck in the SPD parliamentary fraction is not just a question of political style. It is, rather, the expression of a political regime determined to suppress in a ruthless manner any sort of rank-and-file protest. The party leadership is demanding that every functionary in the party demonstrate his or her readiness to stand firm in opposition to public will and the wishes of the electorate.

In this respect the claim by Müntefering that uncooperative deputies are "cowardly" is very revealing. The "dirty dozen" oppositionist parliamentarians are in fact anything other than courageous or deputies bound to a set of principles. Nevertheless, the accusation of cowardice from the mouth of the fraction chairmen has a strange ring to it. A government that buckles down without a whimper to every last wish of the employers and responds to reactionary campaigns waged by the German yellow press with a flurry of new laws, the declares as cowards those who have qualms in demonstrating the harshness and determination called for by the government in imposing deeply unpopular measures.

Schröder, Müntefering, party General Secretary Olaf Scholz, Defence Minister Peter Struck and others in the party leadership interpret "defence of democracy" as the ruthless defence of the interests of Germany's ruling elite. As was the case in the 1920s and '30s, such a course is paving the way for the most right-wing political forces. In common with social democratic forces in France and a number of other countries, the German SPD is merely serving to advance the prospects of the right wing.

The reaction to the conflicts in the SPD by the leadership of the conservative CDU (Christian Democratic Union) has been to lurch visibly to the right. The party now feels in a position, free from the danger of electoral set-back, to publicly agitate for an ultra-reactionary programme of social cuts.

The chair of the CDU, Angela Merkel, has recently declared her support for proposals made by the so-called Herzog commission, which calls for a complete break with the existing solidarity-based German health insurance system. According to Herzog every insured person should pay the same contribution, irrespective of income, and insurance premiums covering entire families are to be abolished. The results for poor families and those with a large number of children will be devastating. For the well-off the proposals will put even more money in their pockets. The vice chairmen of the CDU, Friedrich Merz, greeted the acceptance by his party of the new proposals with the words: "This is the end of social democratic influence inside the CDU."

Roland Koch, prime minister of the state of Hesse, who like Merz belongs to the far right of the CDU, has presented what he refers to as the "biggest programme of savings in postwar history." Koch has been

encouraged not only by the right-wing course of the national government, he has also profited from direct support from the prime minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Peer Steinbrück, who is a member of the SPD. They have jointly worked out an extensive catalogue of proposals for budget cuts and inroads into the German welfare state.

Steinbrück, a finance advisor and technocrat from Schleswig-Holstein, was brought into state government by the former NRW prime minister Wolfgang Clement (SPD) and then promoted to the post of state president after just a few years in office. He has never stood in an election on his route to the top. This utterly dull bureaucrat has introduced a programme of brutal cuts to the social fabric of the biggest industrial region in Europe without exhibiting the least concern for the social and political consequences. Resignations from the party are especially high in the region which was once regarded as the "heartland of social democracy."

The rebel deputies in the SPD fraction have nothing to offer in the way of an alternative programme to the right-wing course of the party leadership. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* described their role as follows: "Demonstrate that, as in the past, there are still opposing positions, and thereby prevent new resignations by committed social democrats: this is the motive of the lefts."

The prevailing element in the stance adopted by the so-called lefts is one of anguish: anguish over the disintegration of the party, anguish over the loss of their own lucrative parliamentary seats, anguish over the end of social stability, but above all anguish that the lurch to the right by the party leadership will lead to a radicalisation of broad masses of the population that the party would no longer be able to control.

In the 1930s, Leon Trotsky spoke of social democracy being ground down between two millstones—and this precisely what is taking place today. The lefts are complaining that their position is becoming increasingly intolerable, squeezed between pressure from the rank and file below and the party headquarters and chancellor's office above. The lefts are attempting to keep the different wings of the party intact and stop the draining of members. In fact this is a hopeless task.

There is no path back to the heydays of social reform of the 1970s. The decline of the SPD has deep objective roots. The pressing necessity is the construction of a party which opposes the policies of the SPD with all its power and puts the struggle for democracy and social equality at the heart of its programme.



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