Schröder, Bush and the “Agenda 2010”

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And still they strut about as stiff,
as straight and thin as a candle,
as if they’d swallowed the corporal’s stick,
Old Fritz knew how to handle.
(Heinrich Heine, “Germany, A Winter’s Tale”)

Heine’s succinct description of a condition of internalised obsequiousness in early 19th century Germany accurately sums up the current state of German Social Democracy (SPD) and its junior partner in government—the Green Party.

The Berlin government has recently been preoccupied with two issues—reconciliation with US president George W. Bush and the implementation of its “Agenda 2010” programme. In both cases, it exhibits two complementary characteristics: bowing and scrapping to one’s superiors, while lashing out at those below. The sycophancy displayed by German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his foreign minister Joschka Fischer towards the warlords in Washington reflects, in inverted fashion, the arrogance with which both men browbeat any critics of their attempt to implement the most far-reaching attacks on social welfare in the history of the federal republic.

The word obscene appears inadequate to properly describe the events that took place on September 24 on the 35th floor of the New York Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. This was the time and place where Schröder and Bush met, accompanied by their foreign ministers, to put aside their differences of past months. The weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* has reported in detail on what took place.

According to *Der Spiegel*’s report, the initially tense atmosphere at the meeting dissipated rapidly following an accident by Schröder’s translator, which Bush countered with a joke. After the translator had accidentally dropped her pen into Bush’s lap, the latter broke the ice with his retort: “That was an attack with weapons of mass destruction!” Schröder responded by opening up to his friend “George” and explaining the difficulties he was having in pushing ahead with his “Agenda 2010” in the face of broad popular opposition and resistance within his own party. “I know what you mean, Gerd,” was the president’s sympathetic response.

The scene is symptomatic. A president who unleashed an illegal war, justified it with blatant lies, and is now confronted with a catastrophe of his own making, tells cheap jokes about weapons of mass destruction. His German visitors, a Social Democrat and a leading Green, feel flattered and open up over their problems with domestic opposition.

Schröder and Fischer never entertained the prospect of seriously challenging the American president, although by all hitherto-accepted standards, Bush’s course is nothing less than criminal. Ignoring international law and the United Nations, he undertook a war of aggression against Iraq and imposed an occupation of the country based on brute force.

The fairy tale of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, which was given as the official reason for war, has been exposed some time ago as an outright lie aimed at misleading American and international public opinion. This lie will go down in history alongside such other unbridled falsifications as the notorious “Ems Telegram,” which German chancellor Bismarck published in a manipulated form in 1870 to provoke a war with France.

When contemplating the reaction by Schröder and Fischer, one should bear in mind the provocative manner in which Bush had previously intervened in German domestic politics. Following German government objections to the Iraq war, Bush openly courted the country’s conservative opposition, worked towards changing the government in Berlin, and sought to split the European Union.

Now Bush is in a fix. Resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq is growing, the costs of the war are rising dramatically, and he is coming under increasing pressure from domestic opponents. Schröder and Fischer react by wagging their tails like pet dogs, snuggling up to their master, and in the process giving Bush the support he needs. Such support boils down to backing the right-wing Republicans around Bush against domestic opposition. Under conditions in which Bush and his clique are increasingly losing support inside the US, they can rely on Schröder and Fischer.

One does not have to be a socialist to grasp the absurdity of such a stance. In a guest column for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the American economist, Nobel Prize winner and

former vice president of the World Bank, Joseph E. Stiglitz, recently warned against the hope that the Bush administration would respond to conciliatory gestures by working more closely with the UN: “When history has anything to tell us, then it teaches us the following: Whoever allows themselves to be pushed around will continue to be pushed around in the future. When the opportunity comes up again the US will decide in line with its own interests irrespective of the position of the UN.”

There is a self-destructive aspect to the behaviour of Schröder and Fischer. They are backing an administration that has made no secret of its hostility to the German government and would not hesitate for a moment to resume hostilities should an opportunity arise. How is such behaviour to be explained?

The answer is to be found in the realm of German domestic policy. In this sphere as well, Schröder and Fischer are following a path that leads to the strengthening of the most right-wing forces and the destruction of their own party. They are intent on imposing their “Agenda 2010” in the face of broad popular opposition—an opposition that only finds a very distorted reflection in the half-hearted objections raised by a handful of SPD deputies. As a result of its policies, the SPD is losing members in droves—since the start of the year 30,000, or 5 percent of members, have left the party—and a catastrophic decline in voter support. This tendency was dramatically confirmed in the recent election in the state of Bavaria, where the SPD slumped below 20 percent of the vote, with the Christian Social Union (CSU) recording 60 percent. Under conditions where a left-wing alternative is lacking, the conservative CSU was able to exploit widespread discontent with the SPD.

The SPD leadership reacts hysterically to any criticism of its “Agenda 2010,” threatening opponents within the party with expulsion, while at the same time working closely with—andtherebystrengthening—theconservativeopposition. In particular, the latest alliance between the prime ministers of the states of North Rhine Westphalia (Peer Steinbrück, SPD) and Hessen (Roland Koch, Christian Democratic Union—CDU), who have put forward their own plan for radical cuts, constitutes nothing less than direct support for the most right-wing figure inside the CDU. The SPD is thus preparing the way for Koch to take over as future chancellor.

To understand such destructive behaviour, it is necessary to briefly review the history and traditions of Social Democracy. Ever since its historic betrayal of 1914, when the party summarily ditched its own programme and supported German imperialism in the First World War, the SPD has proceeded on the basis of the fundamental premise of defending the existing capitalist order against popular opposition—even though such a course only serves to encourage the right wing and ultimately threatens the existence of the SPD itself. The party has consistently given way to pressure from above while either remaining immune to, or lashing out violently against, revolt from below.

A direct line extends from Gustav Noske, who with the words “someone has to play the role of the bloodhound” crushed the revolutionary workers’ uprising in Germany in 1918-1919, to Friedrich Ebert, who as Reich-president worked closely together with the bourgeois right wing in the course of the Weimar Republic. Hermann Müller, the last Social Democratic chancellor before the Second World War, resigned in 1930 after failing to implement drastic cuts in unemployment support payments. After 1930, the SPD supported the emergency government of the centre-right politician Brüning, and in 1932 called for a vote for Hindenburg as Reich-president. In the same year, the party capitulated without a fight when the social democratic government in the state of Prussia was overthrown in a putsch. The events in Prussia were decisive in advancing the interests of the Nazis, who now controlled the Prussian police. One year later, in 1933, the SPD’s choice for president, Hindenburg, appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the Reich.

Following the Second World War, economic recovery enabled the SPD to defend bourgeois order through the mechanisms of social reforms. This changed, however, in the middle of the 1970s. In 1982, SPD chancellor Helmut Schmidt lost power after his policy of drastic budget cuts had driven a wedge between his party and the working class.

Schmidt was replaced by the conservative government led by Helmut Kohl, which in turn lost power in 1998, following its own attacks on the German social fabric. Since retaking power, however, the SPD has moved more and more to the right and has now largely dissipated its popular support. As pressure on the party intensifies, the SPD increasingly cuddles up to politically reactionary forces—both at home and abroad.