German Social Democrats endorse government austerity program

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On June 29, 1991, the scientific committee of the German Chamber of Doctors defined brain death as a "state of the irreversible dissolution of the entire function of the cerebrum, cerebellum and brainstem under conditions of artificially controlled breathing and heart-blood circulation."

The definition could be applied to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). The party continues to exist, but its nerve system has ceased to function. This party, which has uniquely specialised in canalising the discontent of the ordinary citizen, reacting to his concerns and then pacifying him—usually only with promises—is now clinically dead. The party no longer responds to grass roots pressure. This is the conclusion to be drawn from the national conference of the SPD which took place in the Ruhr city of Bochum and ended in the middle of last week.

Just two weeks before the conference, 100,000 had gathered in Berlin to protest against the government and the keystone of its policy, the so-called Agenda 2010. The big turnout was unexpected for a demonstration which was boycotted by Germany's main trade unions. Prior to the demonstration the SPD had suffered record losses in state elections in Bavaria and local elections in Brandenburg. The slump in support was an unmistakable comeuppance for the drastic attacks on the welfare state carried out in an extremely aggressive manner by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who had threatened to resign on a number of occasions should he not get his way.

There was not the slightest trace of this public discontent to be found at the party conference. The 520 delegates were broadly united in their support for the chancellor, giving his speech, which included a defence of his anti-social policies, a standing ovation of several minutes. The main motion presented to the conference by the party executive, calling for an endorsement of Agenda 2010 and detailing its contents, was accepted by delegates with only one dissenting vote.

Earlier SPD conferences were occasionally the scene of considerable and controversial debate. At the end of the 1960s, for example, over the issue of introducing of emergency laws, or at the beginning of the eighties, during the debate on the stationing of American missiles on German territory, vigorous differences of opinion were aired, reflecting in a distorted form broader social concerns. At the Bochum conference the SPD emerged as a hermetically sealed bureaucratic apparatus that sought to nip in the bud even the slightest initiative that could in any way reflect the interests or concerns of the population at large.

The conference was dominated by party bureaucrats and officials whose political views largely correspond to those of the average business manger—with the difference that inside business circles individual responsibility is taken more seriously than by the average SPD delegate. In a permanent search for the path of least resistance, the narrow mindedness of delegates was only exceeded by their political cynicism. They would have even given a standing ovation in Bochum to a motion calling for the dissolution of their own party.

Chancelor Schröder gave his main speech to the conference under the slogan "Courage to tell the truth!" It consisted of 80 minutes of political distortions, absurd claims and outright lies.

Schröder began by stating that the cuts in the German social welfare fabric represented a huge step towards social progress. His Agenda 2010 was not only a "political necessity" but also, he proclaimed, paved the way for a "great social democratic epoch." The transcript of the conference notes at this point "applause."

After implementing social cuts on the one hand, and then awarding tax cuts to the rich and the employers on the other—with a subsequent transfer of income to the wealthy totalling 30 billion euros—the government then used the drop in taxation revenues to justify new social cuts. Schröder then boasted to delegates with conviction: "Our aim remains more social equality!"

To the applause of the delegates he melodramatically exclaimed: "It is true: democracy in Germany began with our SPD. Without us there would not be in Germany, either today or tomorrow, a society that is so free and tolerant, so fair and modern." Even George Orwell would have been taken aback by such a patent reversal of the truth.

What is true is that the Schröder government has introduced three sets of laws regulating domestic security which have restricted, and in some cases done away with, elementary democratic rights. At the same time the destruction of the German welfare state has created conditions that can be exploited by the most reactionary political forces.

In his speech Schröder referred on a number of occasions to history and claimed: "Even if it causes pain today, history will confirm us and show that we were right." No, on the contrary, history has shown that such measures, carried out at the expense of the most vulnerable layers of society, are not only anti-social, they also strengthen the most right-wing elements. At the end of the 1920s the policies of dismantling existing social gains carried out by the coalition government led by social democrat Hermann Müller then paved the way for the successor Brüning government, which in turn introduced emergency laws and subsequently gave way to the Hitler dictatorship.

Noteworthy at the Bochum conference was the fact that not a single delegate was prepared in a serious fashion to challenge the party leaders and chancellor. In the past few weeks there have been endless media commentaries over the "rebellious dozen" SPD lefts. When it came down to it, the party critics of Agenda 2010 in Bochum allowed themselves to be pacified with a few paltry concessions. They acted as

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if vague innuendos by the party executive that it may implement higher taxes on large inheritances and tax some companies who fail to undertake training measures represented a major political about-turn by the SPD-Green government.

Rarely was the incapacity of the critics of the party executive to challenge the reactionary policy of the party leadership so evident. Such critics are profoundly intimidated and function merely as a fig leaf for an obscene political course which in the name of "reforms" is ruining the country's social and democratic fabric.

The refusal by delegates to challenge the political course of the party leadership was also clear in the debate on foreign policy.

In his renowned demagogic fashion, Schröder appealed to delegates: "Social democratic foreign policy was, is, and remains a policy of peace." At the same time, he recalled the opposition of his government to the Iraq war and sought to present this as a principled antiwar standpoint.

Not a single delegate was prepared to stand up and make clear that this opposition was never seriously intended, because the government had never dreamed of closing off German airspace or restricting the use of US bases on German territory for the conduct of the war. In addition, nobody cared to remind delegates that the German government has long since changed its course and now supports the occupation of Iraq by the US.

Immediately after the party conference Schröder travelled to New York and announced that he would agree to a rescheduling of debts owed by Iraq to Germany to the tune of $116 billion. "We have not forgotten what was done to assist Germany after the Second World War," he told journalists, adding: "Without the generous wiping out of German foreign debt, which came about at that time at the initiative of the Americans, there would not have been any recovery and "economic miracle."

Alongside German agreement to the two latest UN resolutions on Iraq, these financial guarantees represent direct assistance towards the reelection of George W. Bush and thereby aid the most right-wing political layers in the US, who in turn will feel encouraged to carry out further and even more devastating military adventures. This is the real content of the "social democratic peace policy."

Nobody at the conference in Bochum was prepared to take up these issues. Instead discussion took place at the lowest possible level. Delegates from the trade unions greeted a resolution which defended the existing wage and tariff agreements as a "resounding success." The jubilation of trade union delegates was bound up with the fact that any change to the existing system would have inevitably threatened their own jobs and positions.

In addition, tariff agreements in Germany have long since ceased to represent a guarantee for reasonable wages and working conditions. Today such agreements are riddled with exception clauses, worked out and signed by the factory trade union committees and based on the demands of local management. In return for regulated tariff agreements the trade unions are expected to accept restrictions on the right to strike, which are exploited by the major concerns to suppress worker militancy.

In his greetings to the conference the chairman of the Federation of German Trade Unions, DGB Michael Sommer, assured the delegates of the unrestricted support of the trade unions and declared: "I have not come here to tell the SPD what, in our opinion, it should or should not do." While offering moral support to the SPD government, Sommer has also been testing out the possibilities of collaboration with the conservative opposition and recently held talks with the leaders of the Christian Social Union over the implementation of reforms to the German health system.

Over the past months the trade union federation has cancelled its own protests against Agenda 2010.

In the meantime, many members of the SPD have made their opinion of the executive patently clear by quitting the party. The growing number of resignations from the party was discussed at every level of the conference—in the plenum itself as well as during the breaks.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the SPD has lost nearly 300,000 members. Last year alone the party lost 26,000. The wave of resignations hit a peak with the announcement of Agenda 2010 in March of this year. In the first nine months of 2003 the party has lost a total of 30,000 members. This figure does not include the 7,000 who have died of old age.

The haemorrhaging of membership has been especially pronounced in the former industrial Ruhr heartland of Germany. In the town of Herten, for example, just a short distance from the conference centre in Bochum, around half the membership has quit the party. It took some effort to persuade one local official from another Ruhr area to refrain from handing over to Schröder a pile of 600 party books from members who have recently resigned.

Many of those who are now turning their backs on the SPD are attempting to come to grips with the reasons for the turn to the right undertaken by the party, which threatens its own existence as it pursues its path of social destruction. The boundless opportunism and subservience shown to the main organisations of big business by Schröder and the entire government team in Berlin no doubt play a significant role. However, by themselves such characteristics are not enough to account for the course undertaken by the government.

More important is the crisis of capitalism on a world scale, which has stripped away the possibilities of implementing policies on the basis of any sort of social equity. Social democracy is no longer able to suppress social contradictions through the implementation of reforms. This is why it has switched to defending the bourgeois order by dismantling existing reforms. Its oft repeated argument is that economic growth is dependent upon reducing wages, additional wage costs and taxes, while at the same time dismantling the welfare state.

Repeatedly, government leaders intoned at the conference that there was no alternative to Agenda 2010. If the SPD did not implement this policy then the conservative opposition would take up the job—with even more devastating consequences.

The most important lesson arising from the Bochum conference is that there can be no return to the sort of social reforms implemented in Germany in the 1970s. The decline of the SPD is the result of profound economic and social processes. It is necessary to build a new party, which carries out the struggle for democracy and social equality on the basis of an international socialist programme.

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