

Germany: Klaus Uwe Benneter—the new SPD general secretary

Ulrich Rippert
17 February 2004

The decline of a party is often expressed in the choice of its political leadership. This could be observed during the period of the fall of the Berlin Wall when Egon Krenz became general secretary of the SED (German Socialist Unity Party) in 1989. His attempts to renew the party were obsolete even before they became public. The committees which he sought to reform, with a huge flourish, dissolved before they could be convened as masses of members deserted the party.

Today the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) is in an advanced stage of dissolution. In protest over the government's ruthless policies attacking social programs, thousands are leaving the party, while at the same time the party executive repeats by rote: "There is no alternative to the Agenda 2010!" In light of this situation, the recent change of leaders at the head of the party resembles the switching of chairs as the Titanic goes under.

Together with the replacement of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder by Franz Müntefering as chairman of the party, the post of general secretary has also been newly occupied. The Berlin-based parliamentary deputy Klaus Uwe Benneter has been chosen to replace the former Hamburg interior minister, Olaf Scholz, in the position.

At first glance the new leading pair seems extraordinarily heterogeneous. Thirty years ago, however, they represented opposing wings inside the SPD. In a perceptive commentary, journalist Kurt Kister remarked in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* that in the '70s Benneter would have denounced Müntefering as a "revisionist traitor to the working class," whereby Müntefering would have likely responded: "Get yourself a proper job, you idiot."

Now the two have come together at the head of the party because it needs two props—or to put it more accurately, crutches—to push ahead with its policies in the face of widespread popular opposition and as members are quitting the SPD in droves.

Franz Müntefering is the archetypal apparatchik, who regards party discipline and devotion to the state as the highest priorities. He is a narrow minded man concerned with the immediate issues arising from holding onto power and who is fundamentally hostile to socialist ideas and internal party democracy.

For his part, the lawyer Klaus Uwe Benneter is a typical representative of the generation of "turned '68'ers." He represents a layer of the protest movement of the '60s who chose in favour of the so-called "march through the institutions" and made their careers in the SPD by vehemently supporting the dismantling of the welfare state, rearmament and attacks on basic democratic rights. His close personal friendship with Schröder is no accident. Both are part of the same layer of social democratic turncoats.

At the age of 18, while still at grammar school, Benneter joined the SPD and like many other pacifists at the time moved to West Berlin where, as a condition of the special post-war status of the city, young Germans were not required to perform compulsory military service. In 1977 he was elected national chairman of the Young Socialists. He belonged to the so-called Stamokap wing of the SPD, which shared an orientation to the positions of the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party) and sought to undertake joint actions with the DKP and its East German counterpart, the governing SED (German Socialist Unity Party). This tendency complained about the close links between the state and big business and demanded that the state free itself from the grip of the big companies and banks and take more control over the economy. Although the political line of the group was directed, not towards the working class but towards increasing the power of the state (along the lines of the SED in the East), the SPD leadership reacted towards it in a thoroughly alarmist manner.

At the beginning of the '70s the party leadership under Willy Brandt had already undertaken measures to intimidate its left-wing critics with the "Radical Decree" and "Incompatibility Resolutions." When economic problems intensified and unemployment rose in the second half of the '70s the climate inside the party also worsened. Brandt's successor as chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, allowed absolutely no criticism of his policies, which were aimed at consolidating the German economy through a combination of concessions to the employers and the dismantling of workers' rights.

When in 1977 Schmidt called for NATO rearmament and the stationing of medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe—leading two years later to the so-called NATO-Double-Decree—his government was confronted not only with workers' protests

against his social policies but also mass demonstrations against war and rearmament. Large numbers—above all students and young people—turned away from the SPD in disappointment and organised themselves in alternative discussion groups and civil initiatives which, a short time later, led to the foundation of the Green Party.

Benneter belonged to those who remained loyal to the SPD and carried forward their “march through the institutions.” This slogan emerged at the end of the '60s following the decline of student protests and was directed at conquering the bureaucratic apparatus of the SPD from the inside.

Although Benneter had repeatedly indicated his docility in the face of the party executive, in 1977 he was replaced as chair of the Young Socialists and, to his surprise, subsequently expelled from the party. This happened despite the fact that, shortly after being voted in as Young Socialist chairman, Benneter cancelled his announced participation in a national demonstration against rearmament after the executive had threatened “consequences” if he were involved. But this submissiveness did not help. In light of the fact that Benneter lacked any charisma as a leading figure, and the executive was sure there was no danger of any sort of resistance on his part—never mind any attempt to form a rival organisation—the party sought to make an example of him. Benneter was expelled and Gerhard Schröder became his replacement as YS chairman.

Even then Benneter refused to seek a viable political alternative, but instead stood like a whipped dog before the door of the SPD waiting to be let back in. After the end of the Schmidt chancellorship, whose right-wing policies had prepared the path for the conservative CDU to take power, Benneter’s hour had come. In 1983 he was readmitted to the SPD, a step made possible by his friend Gerhard Schröder.

Once again in the SPD, Benneter proceeded to advance his career in the local Berlin organisation. As deputy chairman and treasurer in Berlin, and member of the fraction leadership in the Berlin Senate, Benneter has developed into a typical representative of the proverbial Berlin clique. Whether in coalition with the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), the Green Party or, as has been the case for the past two years, with the PDS (Democratic Socialist Party—successor to the SED), Benneter has always landed on his feet. He has never stood out as a propagator of ideas, nor did he excel in the art of debate. But as treasurer of the state party organisation he held together the various threads of the party and established a close mesh of relationships and dependencies.

The SPD was deeply involved in its own wheeling and dealing in the banking scandal that emerged around the Berlin *Bankgesellschaft*, and was aware at an early stage that the Senate had undertaken huge financial guarantees in order to secure fantastic levels of profit for prominent investors. Nevertheless, it was possible for Benneter to lay the blame on the CDU and keep the SPD out of the scandal. In an arrangement with Chancellor Schröder he became chairman of

the parliamentary committee convened to investigate the criminal activities of the leaders of the Berlin CDU. At the same time he did his best to play down the role and involvement of the Berlin SPD.

As a result the CDU slumped in popularity to such an extent that Benneter was able to win a direct election to the German parliament from the Berlin constituency of Steglitz-Zehlendorf, traditionally a safe seat for the CDU.

Since then he has emerged as a vehement defender of Chancellor Schröder and the Agenda 2010, describing critics of welfare cuts and tax gifts to the rich as “political dreamers” unable to recognise social reality. Schröder’s Agenda 2010, according to Benneter, is the “quintessence of what a competent governing social democracy must do today.”

It is a well-known fact that converts to an ideology are the most fervent in the propagation of their beliefs. In this respect Benneter resembles the leading politicians of the Green Party who, against a background of crisis for the SPD, demand there must be no divergence from the “reform course of Agenda 2010.” Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) warned last Monday against any slowing down of the “reorganisation of social measures.” For millions of unemployed—those dependent on social welfare payments and low-income earners who have been hit hard by cuts implemented at the start of the year—Fischer’s comments that only a programme of reforms can save the welfare state appear thoroughly hypocritical.

The rapid transformation of Green pacifists and social democrats critical of capitalism into their opposite is one of the most significant phenomena of the current political situation. Many of those who comprise the personnel of the current government—and who trace their origins to the protest circles—have since improved their social prospects. Adherents of “grass roots” democracy in the past, today they are intent on limiting democratic rights and imposing cuts in the social fabric.

Benneter, who personally felt the hard hand of the party, will now himself swing the whip in order to bring critics of the government into line.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact