Attac and German Trade Union Federation hold joint congress in Berlin

A “Perspectives Congress” without perspectives

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Attac and the trade union leadership in Germany are beginning to close ranks against any political challenge from the left. This was the significance of the so-called “Perspectives Congress” held May 14-16 at the Technical University of Berlin. It was called by Attac and more than 80 organisations of different kinds, from trade unions and officially recognised welfare federations to various radical groups and local organisations.

Berlin Technical University was one of the centres of the 1968 student movement, and about four fifths of the roughly 1,500 congress participants were veterans of that movement, now well into their 50s and 60s.

The congress was attended by a large number of high-ranking representatives of the official German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), who in the past would have assiduously avoided any association with such events.

No less than three members of the five-member DGB executive, the top leadership body, attended: Ursula Engelen-Kefer (deputy chairperson of the DGB and also a member of the Social Democratic Party [SPD] executive), Heinz Putzhammer (SPD) and Dietmar Hexel (SPD). In addition, there were presidents of large DGB unions: Jürgen Peters (SPD) of the IG Metall; Klaus Wiesehügel (SPD) of the IG Bau, the construction workers’ union; Frank Bsirske (Greens) of ver.di, the union of service sector workers; and Eva-Maria Stange from the teachers’ union, GEW.

Although, up to last autumn, the DGB had empathically rejected any association or alliance with Attac, both sides have been steadily moving towards each other ever since. In so doing, they are reacting to the growing gulf between the governing Social Democratic Party and working people, which has led to massive membership losses and devastating electoral defeats for the SPD.

The DGB changed its mind in the wake of a demonstration called by Attac and left-wing groups on November 1, 2003. This protest against the social attacks by the Schröder government attracted more than 100,000 people, even though the unions had explicitly called upon their members not to participate.

The DGB itself has seen a steady erosion of its membership in recent years. Whereas in 1991, following German reunification, its membership stood at 11.8 million, it is now down to 7.7 million. Only one in five workers in Germany is still organised in a labour union.

Given the rabid social attacks of the Schröder government, the union leadership is finding it increasingly difficult to justify its traditional alliance with the SPD. Confronted with the growing anger from below, it is searching for new props and has apparently found one in Attac.

“The old transmission belt between the SPD and the unions has broken down,” said Sven Giegold, one of the founders and a leading representative of Attac Germany. “The unions are beginning to realise that success depends on joint mobilisations with other social movements. For the unions, this is a historic change. This perspectives congress is the first joint step in this direction after the large demonstrations of April 3” (*Freitag*, May 14).

The incessant incantations of “unity,” “agreement” and “concord” between all participants that dominated much of the congress concealed powerful tensions behind the scenes. Though everybody was deeply worried about the mass opposition developing to social democracy, there was no agreement on how to deal with it.

The main cause of disagreement is the issue of a new party. Although the majority of the DGB apparatus remains firmly wedded to the SPD, two initiatives were launched in March that, while not explicitly calling for a new left-reform party, are holding out this possibility as a means to put pressure on the SPD.

One of them, “Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit” (Work and Social Justice—ASG), was founded by a group of Bavarian IG Metall leaders and economics professor Dr. Herbert Schui from Hamburg. Six of its seven initiators have been members of the SPD for 30 to 40 years, and they are calling for a return to the reform policies of the early 1970s based on Keynesian policies.

The other group is called “Wahlalternative 2006” (Election Alternative 2006) and was founded by left-leaning trade unionists around Joachim Bischoff, editor of *Sozialismus* magazine. Its supporters include a number of disgruntled members or supporters of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor party to the former Stalinist state party of East Germany. Bischoff himself, though from the West, briefly joined the PDS executive during the 1990s.

Both groups, which now collaborate, have been met with a response that took their initiators by surprise. Several thousand people subscribed to their newsletters, hundreds attended their meetings, and many local groups were formed. However, neither of them is prepared to marshal the legitimate and explosive anger of workers directly against the SPD.

Both ASG and Wahlalternative explicitly reject a socialist orientation as the basis for a new left party. They are blood and flesh of the labour bureaucracy: “Totally unsuited for the role of heroes of the politically, economically and culturally disenfranchised people of the suburban quarters of our cities,” as one commentator observed, “but the type of thoroughly conventional, worthy, left-wing union functionary” (Franz Walter in *Blätter für Deutsche und Internationale Politik*, April 5).

Notwithstanding the aims and intentions of these functionaries, the idea of creating a new party raises a host of important issues: What is the significance of the failure of social reformism? What are its causes? What lessons can be drawn? What must be the programmatic basis for a party that will indeed uphold social justice and not betray the interests of the workers?

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These questions, which are imperiously posed by the objective situation, were evaded by the "Perspectives Congress." Neither DGB and Attac nor the various "left" groups wanted to address them. Thus, the "Perspectives Congress" became a congress without perspectives, refusing to discuss the most burning issues of the day. Instead, a panoply of more than 120 workshops and panels served to drown the congress in a flood of single issues. Wahlalternative and ASG practiced self-censorship and abstained from offering a workshop or podium on their project. They called a separate meeting at a different location.

Instead of an open and honest debate on programme, the organisers engaged in hollow emotionalism. Critical questions or remarks about the role of the trade unions were invariably countered with appeals for unity. Speakers never tired of stressing that the congress was about finding the "lowest common denominator" to be directed against the "neo-liberal unity party" in parliament. The question of "reform or revolution," they insisted, was not on the agenda and not to be discussed.

Elmar Altvater, senior professor at Berlin Free University and author of well-known studies on globalisation, put himself at the service of this political outlook. In a podium discussion on Saturday afternoon, he referred to Rosa Luxemburg's famous polemic against the reformists. The dialectics of reform and revolution, he claimed, no longer applied. The most important lesson to be drawn from Rosa Luxemburg today was that social movements learn in struggle. For Luxemburg, the final goal had been clear. But today, given the collapse of the Soviet Union, this was no longer the case.

Sven Giegold from Attac Germany, sitting next to Altvater, took up the same line. He warned against "playing off the different positions in this old debate against one another." While steps to overcome the system were not in sight, he said, the same was true for short-term reforms, which clearly would not be enacted by any European government. As neither reform nor revolution was on the agenda, he concluded, the issue was of no practical relevance and did not require clarification.

At the final session, called to conclude the congress on Sunday, Roland Roth, a university teacher from Magdeburg, summed up this same orientation. He was joined, amongst others, by Frank Bsirske, the president of the ver.di union, and Kerstin Sack, from Attac Germany.

The speakers made very clear that the real purpose of preventing programmatic discussions, in the name of "concrete" issues, was to diffuse and stifle a popular mobilisation against the SPD and the Greens by directing it instead into a multitude of separate, fruitless protest actions.

The lowest common denominator, Roth reiterated, was common resistance to neo-liberal policies and attacks on democratic rights. Alternatives existed "only in the plural." Though protest was clearly not sufficient, and though the movement needed "a combination of everyday issues and utopian perspectives," it had to be on guard against "revolutionary Sunday speeches in contradiction to everyday practice."

There could be no talk of "revolutionary immediacy," he continued. More than three decades ago, Marcuse had pointed out to impatient students that the transformation of society would be the work of several generations. And as one got older, one understood the wisdom of that pronouncement.

Roth warned against the founding of a new party, citing an argument that was widespread at the congress: the example of the Greens. "The price of their parliamentary success was that they lost sight of their original aims," he said. Instead of a new party, he called for a "broad social movement rooted in local conditions." Therefore, "localisation" was the next step to open up "a multitude of possibilities for change."

Adolf Bauer, who represented the federation of welfare organisations in Germany, also expressed opposition to a new party. Obviously, he complained, "neo-liberal propaganda" had succeeded in "alienating workers from their own organisations." This was the old strategy of "divide and rule," against which everybody should close ranks.

Kerstin Sack from Attac added that in the past, left parties had always taken great pains to delineate themselves from one another. She had joined Attac precisely because this organisation explicitly left aside the issue of "reform or revolution," which had "only led to splits." She acknowledged that she did not know what to do next, but insisted unity was indispensable.

Frank Bsirske took a more sophisticated approach. Participation in a new social movement, he said, should not be made dependent on support of or opposition to a new party. However, one should keep in mind that the conservatives and Free Democrats, if they returned to government, would continue Schröder's policies in an even more aggressive form. Thus, the ver.di president repeated the timeworn argument that the SPD was the "lesser evil"—something that has been contradicted by the daily experience of millions.

In conclusion, he joined Roland Roth's call for the "localisation" and "decentralisation" of all protests against "Agenda 2010," the government's programme for the destruction of the welfare state. Localisation and decentralisation, he said, was the perspective for the next six months. No more large demonstrations were needed.

Taken as whole, the atmosphere of the "Perspectives Congress" was thoroughly superficial and despondent. Its participants were frightened by the social crisis and the explosive contradictions unleashed by the collapse of reformism. Their state of mind was most strikingly illustrated by the fact that the Iraq war was all but ignored—and this at a time when world public opinion focused on the photographs of torture by US occupying troops in Iraqi prisons!

This glaring omission was not accidental. The silence on Iraq was due to the fact that the reality of the Iraq war utterly exposes the policies of the congress's organisers. The international political situation that gave rise to this war—the drive of the US for world domination, the re-emergence of colonialism, the fight for the re-division of the world among the major imperialist powers—invalidates the perspective of a gradual improvement of social conditions through pressure on the governments of individual countries.

The defense of social gains, resistance to the subordination of all aspects of human life to profit, the fight against militarism and war—all of these immediate and vital aims can be realised only as parts of an overall socialist strategy whose aim is the revolutionary transformation of society. This is the basis on which the Socialist Equality parties around the world are building an alternative to the failed social reformist organisations.

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