

Election Alternative meets in Berlin Another safety valve for German social democracy

Our correspondent
28 June 2004

The first national conference of “Election Alternative: Jobs and Social Justice” held June 20 in Berlin clearly exposed the political character and purpose of this grouping. Rather than a vehicle for growing social opposition to the government of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, it constitutes a bureaucratic mechanism to divert this opposition and to protect the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The conference proceedings vindicated the *World Socialist Web Site*’s prognosis that, given its reformist program, the organization would soon renounce even the limited aims it had initially proclaimed.

The conference contradicted the basic assertion made by Election Alternative (EA) in their first public statement issued in March of this year. “In order to achieve some kind of political progress,” they wrote, “we need a serious electoral alternative that will transform the social pressure from outside parliament into the political system.”

If this plan had been serious and viable, EA could have started to put it into practice with its first conference. The political conditions could hardly be more favourable. Following its devastating losses in the European elections, the Social Democratic Party is weakened and open to attack. A decisive call on working people to go on the offensive against the social attacks by the Schröder government would certainly get a response.

But the EA went out of its way to prevent any such mobilization. Its conference was characterized by frantic back-peddalling. The main speakers on its platform were not even members of the EA, and they warned about the risks of forming a party. Two speakers from the floor who pressed for rapid action were summarily ignored.

Axel Troost, the economist from Bremen who had authored the programmatic discussion paper for the conference, told the press that the group would definitely not run candidates in North Rhine Westphalia state elections next year. (North Rhine Westphalia is the most populous and most industrialized state of [West] Germany and was the heartland of Social Democracy during the postwar period.)

Troost announced that first a registered society will be founded on July 3. This group’s members will then decide in October or November 2004 whether or not a party should be formed. If a party is founded, eventually another decision will be taken as to whether it will put up candidates in the 2006 national elections.

With all this manoeuvring, the EA joins the numerous doctors who have assembled at the SPD’s deathbed in an attempt to revive the party.

German Federation of Trade Unions President Michael Sommer, for example, wrote a June 18 letter to Chancellor Schröder offering to stop criticising the government’s attacks on social benefits in return for a few cosmetic changes to the notorious “Agenda 2010” program of cutbacks. Meanwhile, Oskar Lafontaine, a supposedly left figure in the SPD who resigned as Schröder’s finance minister in 1999, used the occasion of the recent SPD conference in the state of Saarland to publicly shake hands with Franz Müntefering, the right-wing SPD chairman—a picture widely publicised by the German media. Jusos, the SPD youth organisation, joined in. “We must save the party!” its new chairman, Björn Böhning, pleaded at the Jusos national congress in Munich.

Election Alternative forms part of this front, trying to provide support to the SPD from without. The aim of this potential electoral alliance is to uphold the SPD’s traditional political grip over the German working class.

This is the only way to understand the otherwise implausible course of its first national conference. The main initiators of Election Alternative hardly showed up in public—with the exception of Axel Troost, who limited himself to chairing the discussion and giving a brief statement to the press. Two of the four seats on the platform were turned over to speakers who specifically opposed the formation of a new party.

In opening the conference, Sabine Lösing from Attac summed up the orientation of that grouping: to pressure the parties presently represented in parliament from outside. She argued that there exists no potential for changes inside the

SPD, and that the SPD is no longer able to attract and unite ordinary working people, the unemployed and the underprivileged. The Party of Democratic Socialism, PDS (the successor to East Germany's former ruling Stalinist party) likewise had discredited itself by participating in social cuts carried out by SPD-PDS governments in the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and in Berlin.

The next speaker was Detlef Henschel, a well-known figure in Germany's trade union and left milieu. Until 2001, Henschel headed the Industrial Union of Media Workers (IG Medien) and he now works as a lawyer in Berlin. Henschel, 65, resigned from the SPD after 40 years' membership in 2003. "It is totally illusionary to hope for a renewal of the SPD," he declared.

Henschel, however, does not participate in Election Alternative and warned against founding a new party "prematurely." Without roots in a broad social movement, he argued, such a party would share the fate of the Greens and the PDS. It would embark upon the same path of adaptation and integration into establishment policies. The main task, he said, was the development of social movements.

"Anger, disappointment and protest alone do not suffice as a platform," Henschel stressed. It was not enough to put forward a "trade union perspective in defence of the welfare state." What was lacking, he claimed, was the "emergence of a concrete utopia," which could only result from a "generalization of the experience of social struggles." He repeatedly warned against "reaching out for parliamentary representation without the necessary preparatory work in civil society."

This argument was entirely in line with the reasoning of the EA's initiators. They too refer to the primacy of organizing "social struggles"—in order to suppress a discussion about the fundamental lessons of social democracy's failure. While Henschel's reasoning followed the same basic line, he took it to the logical conclusion: a new party is unwarranted.

Both the EA's and Henschel's talk about "social struggles"—in opposition to drawing programmatic lessons—serves to uphold the political disenfranchisement of the population and prevent a political challenge to the SPD. An electoral alliance formed on this basis would merely serve as a safety valve for popular discontent.

The next speaker on the platform, Peter Wahl from the leadership of Attac Germany, echoed Henschel's line. He praised Attac for its role in the "mobilisation against the neo-liberal policies of the past three years" and expressed his scepticism about the "new project." There were differences within Attac on this issue, he said. Attac Germany had taken a decision not to participate in the potential electoral

alliance, to remain "at a certain distance" and to "take a neutral stance." If Attac members participated, they would be suspended from any positions in the organization, and if they were elected they would have to resign from all Attac official functions.

This position, Wahl claimed, stemmed from a "deep distrust toward any party project" following the experience with the Greens and the PDS. Attac's conclusion from this experience is not to subject it to serious political analysis, but to leave the field to the SPD. This is hardly surprising, given that Attac from its origins has been closely aligned with European social democracy.

The last speaker was Anny Heike, a leading official from the IG Metall local in the Bavarian city of Fürth. She is the only founder of the "Initiative for Jobs and Social Justice" (ASG)—one of the two component groups of "Election Alternative Jobs and Social Justice"—who has no history in the SPD. Heike described the impact of the Agenda 2010 cutbacks on union members and reiterated that she had become politically active in order to influence government policies. Apart from Heike, only two other of the six ASG founders turned up at the conference—Klaus Ernst, who gave a brief statement from the floor, and Thomas Händel, who came to the press conference.

Joachim Bischoff and Ralf Krämer, the two main initiators of "Election Alternative," did not speak publicly at the conference. Their conduct was symptomatic of the unprincipled character of the entire project. Joachim Bischoff, editor of the "sozialismus" newspaper, has been active for decades in trade union policies, and Ralf Krämer belongs to the executive of ver.di, Germany's service sector union. Both joined the PDS in recent years and have authored the political line that is now being used to construct a safety net for social democracy.



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