

German Green Party congress: a middle-class party of German imperialism

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The most remarkable thing about the Green Party congress, held October 2-3 in the northern German city of Kiel, was the absence of any serious discussion. The pressing social problems of the day—rising unemployment, growing social polarisation due to cuts in social programs and tax handouts to the wealthy, electoral gains of neo-fascist parties in recent state elections—were more or less ignored.

Instead, the delegates congratulated each other on the party's election results and its standing in the opinion polls. The so-called "harmony congress" highlighted the transformation the Greens have undergone in the five years since they first entered government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Nowhere to be heard were the loud and tearful arguments of previous congresses between rival "Fundis" (fundamentalist) and "Realos" (realist) factions. These had been based more on emotions than on politics. Nevertheless, such discussions did reflect political processes taking place in society. Only five years ago, Green leader Joschka Fischer was hit by a red paint balloon tossed by a Green Party member angered by the foreign minister's performance.

In Kiel, the Greens showed themselves for what they really are: a self-important, pro-capitalist party of the middle class, hardly differing from their competitors in the "free-market liberal" Free Democrats (FDP).

At last year's special congress, the Greens unconditionally supported German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010, thereby paving the way for the greatest attacks on social welfare in the history of the German Federal Republic. Since then, in discussions over the unemployment "reforms" mandated by the Hartz IV legislation, the Greens have used every opportunity to make clear their role in ensuring that the SPD not cave in to popular anger and resistance. On the destruction of social welfare, officially known as the "reform of the welfare state," speaker after speaker at the Kiel congress rose to praise the party as the "motor of reform."

The congress opened with the reelection of Reinhard Bütikofer as party chairman. In his keynote speech, Bütikofer called for a "continuation of the reform course."

The "main conflict over the social and employment market reforms" is not yet over, he declared. He went on to say that those who believed there would be more social justice if the reforms were halted were deluding themselves.

In light of the mass protests that have occurred in Germany in recent months, Bütikofer suggested that the employment reforms "in the coming year be critically examined and, where necessary, corrected." This was enough to placate any potentially wayward delegates.

Stephan Schilling, president of the youth organisation of the Greens, put forward a proposal for a "citizens' insurance scheme," a policy favoured by sections of the Green Party. In contrast to the current social insurance scheme, into which workers earning less than 3,457 euros a month pay contributions, a citizens' insurance scheme would increase the income threshold to 5,150 euros. (Currently, those earning more than 3,457 can

opt instead to pay into a private insurance scheme.) Some delegates said that this was a small amount "that would close the equity loophole in Agenda 2010." Although received with applause, even this small change was rejected by the majority.

A long list of leading party members warned that an increase in the income threshold would "significantly weigh down the employment market." Any threat to the jobs of the better-paid, they argued, would have repercussions for lower-paid workers, whose own jobs were dependent on the former.

Professor Karl Lauterbach, invited as a guest to give a report on the meaning of the citizens' insurance scheme, argued along the same lines. The professor from Cologne is often described as the "father of citizens' insurance" and is a scientific advisor to the SPD.

Whether he was sent to the congress by SPD Chairman Franz Müntefering remains unclear. Müntefering had sent his own written greetings to the conference, which also called upon delegates to continue their party's cooperation with the SPD and cautioned that they not get carried away. In an interview the same weekend with the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, Müntefering stressed that red (i.e., the SPD in the coalition government) was a primary colour, and green a secondary one.

The citizens' insurance model favoured by the party congress is a two-sided coin. Its advocates claim that it should include all types of incomes, including those of professionals, public servants and small-business people, in order to finance the public health insurance scheme. Other types of income such as interest and profits on shares should also have social insurance contributions deducted.

However, a host of ancillary wage costs, such as payments made by employers to medical insurers on behalf of their employees, are to be reduced or ultimately abolished.

In the end, the proposal of the party executive, which in general advocated retaining the current system (where the employee's contribution is the same as the employer's), with a contribution limit of 13 percent of the salary (6.5 percent for the employee) was accepted.

Hans Christian Ströbele, who came to the microphone as a representative of the party's left wing, put forward a proposal for an income tax, which he called the "millionaire's tax." In preparation for the congress, this plan had already been agreed to by the party executive—in a watered-down form.

"I am satisfied," Ströbele was quoted as saying by the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*. The main thing was to ensure that the topic not be dropped altogether. The compromise was a "good working foundation," explained Ströbele. A working group is to determine, between now and the next congress, how large incomes can be taxed without bureaucratic consequences outweighing the financial advantages.

This is a cynical ruse, aimed at giving the impression that a left wing wields influence within the party, even though none of its representatives seriously believe their party would ever demand a tax on large incomes, let alone implement one.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer summed up the opportunism of the Greens with talk about contradictions in the concepts of the party that had to be programmatically resolved. One of these contradictions, Fischer explained, was a lack of money to finance the kind of welfare state the Greens would like to see.

None of the delegates bothered to ask him why the SPD-Green coalition government, in addition to abolishing the trade tax on capital, had drastically reduced the tax rate on the highest incomes. At the start of next year, the third phase of tax reform is due to come into effect. The top tax rate will by then have fallen from 53 percent at the start of the first SDP-Green government term in 1998 to 42 percent. Those earning more than 1 million euros per year will save an extra 100,000 euros, even as the Green Party brandishes the “empty cash register” argument to justify further cuts in social programs.

Fischer also talked about contradictions in international policy. This included his so-called “stress ratio” between fundamental democratic rights and measures “to protect them in times of terror.” With these words, Fischer not only defended the repressive measures announced by Russian President Putin after the hostage siege in Beslan; he also adopted the argumentation of the American government, which justifies its continuous attack on democratic rights by citing the so-called “war on terrorism.”

The recent history of the Green Party is full of examples of such “contradictions” and their resolution—first and foremost, the transition of the Greens from pacifism to militarism. The party’s shift from the “promotion of peace,” to the “legislation of peace,” and then to the “enforcement of peace” has been breathtaking.

Congress delegates supported a resolution opposing the export of armaments, including the government’s plans to ship 20 Fuchs tanks and 80 trucks to the Iraqi interim government. Two days later, the Greens’ leadership dismissed this resolution as irrelevant.

The Greens’ chairwoman, Claudia Roth, explained that the government decision to send arms to Iraq was not an example of arms export in the classic sense, but rather a measure of “armaments support.” In a statement from the party executive, she wrote: “The Iraqi police and soldiers of the Interim Government are constantly threatened by attacks and assassinations, gunned down and bombed. Can anyone refuse the request of their government for armed vehicles?”

Should the German government at some point conclude that the moment had arrived for sending German troops to Iraq, the Green Party leadership would employ similar sophistries. Fischer and Roth would probably declare that the troops were being sent not to wage war, but rather to promote peace. The opportunism of the Greens knows no limits.

The relentless right-wing trajectory of the Greens is a product of their basic programmatic conceptions and their history. The Kiel congress marked the 25th anniversary of the founding of the party. Many founding members of the Greens arose out of the student protest movement of the 1960s. Although this movement was critical of German capitalist society and its Nazi past, it viewed the working class as a conservative force, fully integrated into the system and thoroughly corrupted by consumerism.

During the massive industrial struggles in France in 1968 and Germany in 1969, numerous political groups emerged that called themselves socialist and revolutionary and were oriented toward Mao, Che Guevara and other radical icons of the time. The hero worship of these figures substituted for a serious turn among these layers toward Marxism and the working class. Still another segment of the student movement turned to the SPD, idealising the party leader and former chancellor, Willy Brandt.

During the mid-1970s, the SPD turned sharply to the right, the working class suffered numerous defeats, and the bourgeoisie went on an international offensive. The initial exuberance of the student movement was replaced by frustration and demoralisation. A period ensued in which once-held political perspectives and convictions were rejected and

discarded, without any serious evaluation having been made.

It was under these conditions, in the late 1970s, that the Green Party emerged. It rejected not only a socialist perspective and the class struggle; it also dismissed the conception that political programs reflect social interests. The environment, peace and democracy were the proclaimed cornerstones of its program, and the party maintained that these goals could be advanced without calling into question existing property relations.

With the goal of “humanising” politics and society, the Greens entered the Bundestag (federal parliament) in the early 1980s. During the Green Party’s long years in opposition against the conservative government of Helmut Kohl, which presided over increasing economic stagnation, support for the Greens increased appreciably.

But as the basic class divisions within society expressed themselves with increasing starkness, the Greens used their talk of “humanitarian aims” to cloak their growing accommodation to capitalist and imperialist interests. The party became a political instrument of the ruling elite, and a section of the former protest generation integrated itself into the political establishment.

The social milieu upon which they have up to now been based is deeply divided. While the fortunes of a relatively small section of the middle class have increased, the overwhelming majority has faced growing economic insecurity and stagnating living standards.

The Greens have emerged today as a party of the “well-off.” According to a recent study, Green Party members, on average, earn more than the members of any of the other major parties, including the conservative parties.

Party chairman Reinhard Bütikofer is a typical representative of the Greens. In the beginning of the 1970s, he studied philosophy and history at Heidelberg, and between 1974 and 1980 he was a member of the Maoist Communist High School Group. Beginning in 1982, he was active in the Greens-Alternative List and became a Heidelberg city councillor for the Greens two years later. This was followed by a stint as state parliamentarian and spokesman for the Realo wing of the party, and finally as national organiser. Two years ago, he was elected Green Party chairman.

Today, Bütikofer embodies the smugness and complacency of the Greens—acting as an advisor to the powers that be and maintaining close relations with various business organisations that regard him and his party as partners.



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