

German Social Democrats launch state election campaign

SPD candidate: “I am not promising jobs”

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On April 9, the SPD (Social Democratic Party) opened the so-called “hot phase” of its election campaign in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia with a meeting in the city of Dortmund.

For the last 38 years, the SPD has held the post of prime minister in this state, which is the most densely populated in the Federal Republic. For the past 10 years, the SPD has ruled the state in coalition with the Green Party.

However, recent polls point to a clear defeat for the SPD in the election, to be held in six weeks’ time.

Analogies with the sinking of the Titanic are admittedly overused. Nevertheless, this journalist, attending the party rally last Saturday, could not help recalling one scene from the *Titanic* film. While the ship sinks, the orchestra, on the instructions of the captain, continues to play as if nothing had happened. The captain and ship’s crew are helpless to prevent the ship slipping beneath the waves, and try instead to calm the passengers through a determined effort to ignore reality.

This was basically the tenor of the meeting held in Westphalia. The SPD, its largest regional organisation (approximately a quarter of all SPD members live in North-Rhine Westphalia), as well as the federal government led by the SPD are steering unerringly towards the rocks. The captains—state Prime Minister Peer Steinbrück, Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and SPD Federal Chairman Franz Müntefering all spoke at the rally—see no way of preventing the imminent disaster and exhort the assembled membership to keep calm.

The Social Democratic organisers of the meeting even provided, inadvertently, some comic touches: they invited the aging pop star Michael Holm to perform prior to the speeches of Steinbrück, Schröder and Müntefering. Like the SPD itself, Holm’s most successful years were back in the 1970s. For the mostly older party faithful in the hall, he sang his musty hits “Mendocino” and “Tears Don’t Lie.”

Nevertheless, the mood of the 8,000-strong audience remained sombre. Members from local associations complained of the decrease in membership, which would make the coming election campaign “really hard.” At one time, the SPD had nearly 300,000 members in North-Rhine Westphalia. Now,

according to the party’s own figures, the total stands at “approximately 170,000.”

One elderly member from a local association in Mülheim reported, “Many pensioners have resigned from our group due to the cuts in pensions.” He failed to understand why this should be, when, after all, everybody had to accept cuts. “I am also working for less money in the transport branch,” he said.

A 21-year-old explained that he had joined the SPD two years previously because of the “opposition of the federal government to the Iraq war.” He failed to, or did not want to, explain, why he had remained in the party after the SPD-led government subsequently gave its approval to the occupation of Iraq. (“Yes, that’s right—unfortunately,” he was forced to concede).

The reasons for the profound gulf between the people of the Ruhr region and the SPD are not hard to grasp. Joblessness and poverty are rising rapidly. Unemployment in the former industrial heartland of Germany totals more than 1 million. In some regions of the Ruhr, unemployment affects between 20 and 30 percent of the population.

Nearly 15 percent of the North-Rhine Westphalia population (approximately 2.7 million people) are poor. Nearly one in three of those registered as poor has work, but only in the form of a cheap-wage or part-time job. On the other hand, the ranks of the rich are rising in North-Rhine Westphalia, as they are across Germany.

In earlier election campaigns, the SPD promised to create new jobs. This time around, it has openly declared that job creation is not its responsibility. Peer Steinbrück, who assumed the post of state prime minister in 2002 (replacing the current federal economics and labour minister, Wolfgang Clement) and is standing in an election for the first time in his life, went so far as to produce posters with the slogan, “I Am Not Promising Jobs.”

As the first speaker at the meeting, Steinbrück nevertheless described unemployment as the most important problem and stated, “Here in the hall is the force that can best resolve this problem.” He failed, however, to put forward any job-creating measures or other steps to reduce unemployment. Instead, he

repeated the current mantra of the SPD that “politics cannot create jobs.” Only the economy can create jobs, he said, and the task of politicians is merely to create favourable conditions. This sage observation was followed by an appeal to big business “to take its responsibility seriously.”

Schröder and Müntefering also made appeals to business circles. They demagogically criticised social injustice, and Müntefering went so far as to declare he wanted to tame capitalism—although he immediately apologised for his choice of words.

In reality, nothing the SPD leaders said hinted even remotely at a change in the policies that have led to a vast growth in social inequality.

Steinbrück expressly thanked Chancellor Schröder for the so-called Hartz reforms (silence in the hall)—the most comprehensive programme of attacks on the unemployed in German history. He hoped, he continued, that the Hartz IV reforms would soon bring the desired results (deathly silence).

Schröder also defended the dismantling of Germany’s social welfare system in his speech. He praised cuts in pensions, the Hartz laws, and cuts in health benefits, claiming that government reforms had successfully transformed a billion-euro deficit in the health system into a surplus of 4 billion euros.

He declined to add that this had come about exclusively at the expense of ordinary working people, who are forced to pay several billion euros more in the form of compulsory fees for doctor’s visits, along with other added payments. He demagogically sought to head off discontent over growing inequality by declaring, to applause, “I demand that this money be invested in lowering contributions, and not in increasing salaries for executives.”

In fact, the declared aim of Schröder’s health reform is to shift costs from the employers onto the backs of ordinary insured people. At the start of next year, a new regulation comes into force that will further increase health insurance contributions by employees. This measure represents a crucial departure from the current system, in which employers and workers pay equivalent amounts towards health costs.

Schröder claimed that his government had saved “the exemplary German health insurance system.” Whoever says differently, he said, should look at other European countries, “not to speak of non-European countries.” In other words, German workers should be happy that they are not as bad off as workers in Poland or Russia.

Apparently, the only argument the SPD can muster is that “the other parties are even worse than we are.” This type of argument is very popular at the moment. At the Dortmund meeting, half of the speaking time was used to grumble about the unfair and anti-social programmes of the opposition parties: the CDU/CSU and FDP (Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union and the Free Democratic Party).

SPD speakers sought to trumpet their “successes” without

going into any details. (“You know them,” Steinbrück said). Steinbrück exclaimed that alongside unemployment, education would be a central topic of the SPD election campaign. To significant applause he stated, “In North-Rhine Westphalia, initial university education remains free of charge.”

The SPD had, in fact, rejected all study fees not too long ago. Last summer, however, under Steinbrück, the party introduced fees for the 13th term of study and for additional courses. At the same time, the shift to a bachelor/masters system of higher education in German states means that only the first six terms of university education will remain free of charge. There are already those in the SPD who proclaim that the exemption from charges for these six terms cannot be justified under conditions in which other governments have introduced fees.

Despite all the attacks made on the CDU/CSU opposition and the FDP, Steinbrück refused to rule out a coalition with these parties. Before the Dortmund meeting, he told the news magazine *Focus* he could imagine alternative coalitions to the current one with the Greens.

Referring to the Greens, he declared, “We are undertaking an election campaign for us and for nobody else in North-Rhine Westphalia.” Coalition decisions would be made on the basis of election results and with a view to “the interests of the state.”

Steinbrück’s speech ended with a call for the assembled “to fight” and “mobilise.” Many of those SPD members in attendance, however, did not hear the speech by Müntefering, who spoke last. In droves, they left the ship—pardon, the hall—before the SPD chairman had finished his speech.

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