German Green Party election program—tailored to the interest of big business

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At last week's national congress, the German Greens—Bündnis [Alliance] 90/The Greens—adopted the program they will take into the elections expected this September. In their programmatic statements, the Greens pick up from where they left off as partners in the previous government coalition and for which they have been punished in numerous state and local elections—with policies tailored to the interests of big business.

In their election manifesto, the Greens declare the "reform policies" of the last seven years a success, although mistakes were "unfortunately" also made. Every measure taken by the government that has adversely affected the population was blamed on the "blockade politics" of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) opposition, or on the Greens' government coalition partners, the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The Greens would like people to believe that if things had gone according to their plans, everything would have been different. Unfortunately for them, their support for every cut in social services, tax cuts for the rich and businesses, and the dispatch of German troops to the Balkans, among other policies, is still fresh in the minds of the population.

A simple comparison sheds light on the right-wing trajectory that the Greens have followed during their time in office.

Last month, the Greens' leader and German foreign minister Joschka Fischer introduced his new book to the press, entitled *The Return of History*.

A *Berliner Zeitung* journalist proceeded to compare the new work with a previous book by Fischer. In that earlier book, *Risiko Deutschland* (*Germany at Risk*), published shortly before the formation of the SPD-Green coalition government, Fischer warned against the dangers involved in a foreign policy based on militarism. At the end of the Helmut Kohl era, Fischer stated that the future development of Germany was "easy to anticipate."

"It begins with the slogan 'take more responsibility,' " he wrote, "then the first military deployment will take place, the first deaths will occur, the first nationalist rituals will follow, the generals will want more freedom, war heroes will again be glorified and long-disposed of traditions exhumed." At the same time, he prophesised, Germany would strive to obtain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and then "the main goal of German nationalist revisionists" would be within close reach.

Since the author of these lines became German foreign minister, he has "done a lot to realise this horror scenario," observed the *Berliner Zeitung*. All of the developments that Fischer warned against at the end of the 1990s have become reality under his watch.

In a similar vein, one can compare the new election manifesto with that adopted 10 years ago. Back then, the Greens still promoted themselves as pacifists and demanded Germany's withdrawal from NATO and the disbanding of the German army. Together with other demands made at the time—such as defence of the environment, taxes on large consumers of energy and corporate polluters, defence of migrants, and so on—they read today as little more than a bad joke.

The Greens have shifted towards the defence of big business all along the line, and they have now codified this lurch to the right in programmatic form.

"With the SPD-Green taxation reform, the reduction in ancillary wage costs [such as payments made by employers to medical insurers on behalf of their employees]

and the reform of the social security system [that is, the retrograde Hartz laws], we have improved the general framework for companies in the employment market as well as created new jobs," claim the Greens in the introduction to the first chapter, "Creating New Jobs."

Two sentences later, they complain that "in spite of the fact that many companies have profited from these reforms, the promise of businesses not to make employees redundant has not been kept." And what do the Greens conclude from this? More of the same: "It is not the wages in this country that are too high, but rather the ancillary wage costs." These costs, which contribute towards various social services for employees such as health care and pensions, have to be reduced, especially in the "employee-intensive service sector, in part-time employment and in the low-wage sector."

Although the Greens place great stress on ancillary costs, they don't really take seriously their statement that wages are not too high. In the chapter "For a New Pay Scale," they explicitly demand a reduction in wages: "We suggest that future pay scale negotiations should explore the possibility of reducing working hours with a corresponding reduction in wages."

In those areas where the Greens still propose improvements, they remain—as usual— wishy-washy and vague. "The levels of social security payments and unemployment benefits must be significantly increased so that recipients are protected against poverty and a socio-cultural minimum level of existence can be secured."

The Greens, however, were partially responsible for setting the current payments at 345 euros per month in the western part of Germany and 331 in the east. When the Hartz laws that specified these levels were being debated in parliament, the Greens didn't raise any objections. And what they mean by a "significant" increase is their own secret. Party chairman Reinhard Bütikofer, however, explained in an interview the day before the conference, "It would be completely wrong now to promise that we could increase unemployment payments by 19 or 20 percent next year."

Within this context, it is not hard to understand what is really meant by the Greens' talk of introducing a minimum wage. It would be nothing

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more than a “mini-wage,” which would not prevent the creation of a cheap-labour market, but on the contrary, make it possible.

One programmatic point the Greens have emphasised, because it purportedly shows their “emancipative” character, is the demand for the introduction of a “citizens’ insurance.” However, the Greens’ conception of a citizens’ insurance is very different from the one commonly held. A scheme worthy of its name would have to include all areas of social security, and all citizens and residents, without exceptions, and would permit payments towards public health, pension and the unemployment insurance pool to be based on financial means.

Not only wages and salaries, but every other form of income (such as capital, rent, and leases) would have to be made sources of funding for this scheme. The rich would have to pay more, the poor less or nothing at all. Private insurance would be abolished together with the income ceilings that the better-paid use to leave the public health system and switch to cheaper, private insurance.

The Greens demand a citizens’ insurance, though only in the area of health care. At the same time they want to see “more competition” between medical insurers and “service providers,” by which they mean doctors, hospitals, etc. In other words, the Greens’ citizens’ insurance would mark a further step towards the dismantling of the public health system, its main aim being more capitalist competition.

An increase in the Value-Added Tax (VAT) and petroleum tax, which numbers of Greens have proposed, was rejected at the conference on the advice of the party leadership. However, this decision was not based on the consequences for the majority of the population arising from increasing these regressive taxes, but on its effects in the present economic situation and on government finances, as well as tactical considerations. For the Greens, domestic demand has to be increased; therefore, an increase to the VAT would be “poison for businesses.”

Aside from this, the CDU is also demanding a VAT increase. Green environment minister Jürgen Trittin said that he is not “dogmatic” on the question of VAT, but that “in a situation where the Union parties want to rip off normal wage earners in order to reduce taxes for the better off, the Greens should not join the queue as well and be clobbered if it is not absolutely necessary.”

Regarding an increase in petroleum tax, the manifesto declares that this would be—due to the trend of “petrol tank tourism” in neighbouring countries (many Germans obtain their petrol from border countries where it is cheaper)—the wrong way to go. The Greens have obviously learnt some lessons from the increase in the tobacco tax introduced by the SPD-Green government. This was also justified by concerns for the population’s health. When the consumption of cigarettes and tobacco later fell, however (and the black market in cigarettes increased), and revenues sank, the government was outraged. As a result of this experience, the Greens now base themselves on a “higher, united, minimum EU tax for energy.” If “petrol tank tourism” then ceases, nothing would stand in the way of increasing the petroleum tax.

Even though an increase to the VAT and the petroleum tax has for the moment been postponed, the Greens are not advocating a reduction in taxes for the population either: “We’re not promising any further tax cuts.”

However, an exception will be made—for business. The Greens want to “strengthen” and further develop property taxes by considering them as a “communal tax on assets.” Thus, “Through moratoriums or tax exemptions for both these taxes, excessive strains on companies in a difficult economic position can be prevented.”

The Greens also demand the elimination of “environmentally destructive subsidies” such as the transport subsidy, which provides a minimal tax rebate for commuters, as well as subsidies to the coal industry. The new CDU-Free Democratic Party (FDP) state government in North Rhine Westphalia is currently implementing this latter demand of the Greens.

The Greens have made a big fuss about their demands for an increase in income taxes for the rich. On closer examination, it is really a sham. The Greens propose to change the taxation law in the immediate future so that private individuals and small businesses are taxed separately. “We want to bring taxes for small businesses down to a low level.” For individuals, they propose increasing the top tax rate from 42 to 45 percent.

Seven years ago, when the Greens and SPD took over the reins of power, the tax rate for the richest layer of the population was *53 percent*. Today the top rate is 42 percent and, the Greens propose, should be increased to 45 percent in order to create the “financial leeway for the reduction in ancillary costs,” whose beneficiaries would be none other than...big business and the wealthy.

This kind of sleight-of-hand makes clear that the Greens view the political situation from the same general angle as the CDU/CSU, FDP and SPD politicians. The Greens are thoroughly distant from the problems and concerns of the population, whom they view with indifference.

The character of the Greens’ most recent national congress and its general atmosphere underscored the political context in which these right-wing policies were advanced. At their congress six years ago, Foreign Minister Fischer was sharply criticised and was hit by a paint bomb because he had instigated the first foreign deployment of German troops since World War II—participation in the war in the former Yugoslavia. In contrast, last week’s conference saw Fischer, as the party’s only leading candidate, receive a standing ovation, a scene that one normally sees at the conferences of the CDU, CSU or SPD.

After the political opportunism of the course of the last years, it is not surprising that the Greens have now given up their principle of the so-called double-leadership—where a woman always had to be represented at the top. Fischer’s unquestioned prominence is preparation by the party leadership for serious inner-party conflicts.

On the one hand, critics inside the party of the leadership’s pro-business orientation draw some strength from similar criticisms of neo-liberalism made by the newly formed “Left Party.” On the other hand, this orientation was bound up with the acquisition of countless well-paid government posts—the possible loss of which is already unleashing frustration. All opinion polls point to declining support for the Greens and their likely relegation to the opposition benches. Such a prospect throws the continued stability or even existence of the party into question. Fischer’s dominance of the party is an attempt to preserve whatever is left to rescue.

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