

SPD's program for German election: window dressing and lies

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At first glance the manifesto of Germany's governing Social Democratic Party (SPD) for the September 18 general election appears bizarre. "We stand for social justice" is boldly printed on the election posters for the party that is responsible for the most far-reaching welfare cuts and the highest number of unemployed since the Second World War.

The SPD program brazenly states, "We will not deviate from our long-term goal of full employment," and continues, "We are striving for a humane society, which feels pledged to liberty, justice and solidarity." There is no limit to the cynicism of the party's executive committee with its repeated references to "social justice", "sharing", "participation", "solidarity" and "full employment".

In some sections the text reads like an opposition program against the government. However, the accumulation of clichés is not just aimed at preparing the SPD for a possible defeat at the polls and the role of parliamentary opposition. The Social Democrats make clear that they do not have the slightest interest in the problems that beset millions of people on a daily basis.

Behind the empty phrases about more "social justice" is the same arrogance that characterised the response of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and party chairman Franz Müntefering to massive state electoral defeats: there is no alternative and therefore will be no change to the government's anti-social policies, its Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV measures.

A closer look at the document shows the SPD is determined to pursue its unpopular policies. All talk of "solidarity" and the "stabilisation of the welfare state" is mere window dressing aimed at covering up the real core of the SPD program.

The SPD proudly draws up a balance sheet of its seven-year government with the words: "We overcame the standstill... We have acted with determination and purpose, and also in the face of opposition." This is correct—there is definite opposition to the social and welfare cuts. The resistance was by workers, unemployed persons and pensioners, who after decades of hard work were not prepared to be condemned to living on a monthly pittance or Germany's notorious one-euro jobs.

With his announcement of new elections and his speech to the German parliament (Bundestag) on July 1, Chancellor Schröder made clear that the dissolution of parliament amounted to an ultimatum to the German people. The prematurely-called elections were aimed at securing a new majority for imposing the social cuts—either in the shape of a conservative government, a grand

coalition of the SPD and the conservative opposition, or the less probable alternative—a renewed mandate for the current SPD-Green party government.

In terms of content, therefore, the SPD manifesto does not deviate in the least from the political line, which, over the past seven years, has resulted in over five million unemployed and the most comprehensive welfare cuts since the formation of the Federal Republic.

"The Agenda 2010 is the most important reform project for a long time," the manifesto declares. "It is the correct political answer to global economies and the aging of our society [...] The Agenda 2010 works. We will implement it firmly and develop it further."

The creation of hundreds of thousands of low-paid jobs and the associated self-exploitation is glorified: "Our labour policy is beginning to work. New ways out of unemployment have been opened up through *Ich-Ags* (one-man businesses) and mini jobs."

The manifesto continues: "In particular youth have better chances in the job market. Youth unemployment is sinking. The training pact functions." In reality, the gap between training places and applicants has rarely been as large as this year. According to the federal employment agency, the numerical difference between training places and applicants amounted to nearly 170,000 in July. This figure is 5.2 percent higher than in July last year. In particular, the number of workplace training opportunities has declined. Of under 25-year olds, more than 629,000 are unemployed.

At the same time, the document defends the newly-introduced "criteria of reasonableness": "Whoever fails to find the job he desires, despite every assistance and support, must also be prepared to accept other work. We cannot accept that Germany with high unemployment in certain occupations is highly dependent on workers—often seasonal—from foreign countries." In other words, if an unemployed steel worker does not find the "job he desires", he will be forced to accept backbreaking, poorly-paid work such as harvesting the asparagus crop.

In similar manner, the document praises the dismantling of the country's system of health care and pension provision. "The health reform has helped encourage individual responsibility, guaranteed and improved the care of all those insured and protected the principle of solidarity."

The reality is that for the first time the sick now have to make regular payments for visits to the doctor. Moreover, Germany's

traditional “solidarity principle”—i.e., payments toward workers’ health and pension insurance are financed equally by the worker and his employer—has been undermined by requiring employees to make additional payments.

What the document describes as “a new lasting contribution towards fairness between all generations”, is in fact a new calculation of the level of pensions that will substantially affect the income of new retirees. The government’s aim is to increasingly force workers to take up private pension schemes and so benefit Germany’s insurance companies.

The express goal of all these cuts is to “lower ancillary wage costs” for enterprises, and encourage a redistribution of wealth from the poorest layers to the rich. The SPD program boasts: “We want a successful economy and are doing a great deal toward improving competitiveness... The creation of new jobs is in the first place the task of the country’s businesses. We ensured that they are competitive with regard to taxes and duties. We lowered ancillary wage costs (pensions and health insurance) with our legislation.” Notably, the document fails to record that the SPD-Green government also introduced unprecedented reductions in company taxes.

The claim that “if the economy grows, incomes and employment rise” has long been disproved. In recent years, Germany’s major companies have notched up record profits, not least because of pro-business government legislation, while millions of jobs have been lost, wages cut, work times extended and working conditions worsened. One only has to recall the example of the head of Deutsche Bank—Josef Ackermann (annual income 11 million euros)—who at the start of this year revealed record profits for the bank (over 4 billion euros), while announcing plans for the destruction of a further 6,000 jobs.

Defenders of the SPD have repeatedly pointed to two innovations in the manifesto to claim that the Social Democrats are progressive with respect to social issues: the demand for the introduction of a citizens’ insurance and calls for renewed taxation of the rich. Both demands are utterly deceitful.

Along with the Greens, the SPD only calls for a “citizens’ insurance” in the area of health care. The SPD proposals are aimed solely at encouraging a switch to private health insurance—thus breaking up Germany’s existing health care system and securing new revenue and profits for private insurers.

The SPD is also proposing a 3 percent tax increase for those with a yearly income of 250,000 euros (single earners) and 500,000 euros (married persons). The proposal is entirely cynical. The highest tax rate for these incomes stood at 53 percent under the conservative Christian democratic government of Helmut Kohl, but has been lowered by the current government to 42 percent. Bearing in mind that the wealthy have access to a myriad of tax loopholes, it is clear that this new proposal will do nothing to halt the unprecedented redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich that has taken place under this government.

Under the term “security”, the SPD means the dismantling of democratic rights and the strengthening of the state against the people as a whole. After the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, the government rushed through two packages of anti-terrorism measures that altered nearly one hundred existing German laws to

expand and increase the powers of Germany’s intelligence and security authorities.

As a result, the separation of the police and secret services, based on Germany’s experience with the Nazi Gestapo, has been done away with and a new information and analysis centre has been established in Berlin. The government’s “immigration law” is aimed at preventing immigration and is praised in the SPD election manifesto. SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily has called for camps for asylum-seekers to be set up in Africa and protective custody for whomever the security forces claim is “suspect”.

The manifesto makes no bones about the SPD’s determination to establish a “strong state”. In an introductory paragraph, the SPD calls for “Security for all—not only those who can afford a private security agency”, and lists the areas in which the SPD is seeking to beef up the state. One priority is new measures to deal with minor offences committed by youth, whom the SPD evidently regard as the largest security risk.

The document calls for an expansion of the powers of the police and security authorities: “improvement of technical equipment”, “strengthening the powers of the federation with regard to counter-terrorism “ and “improvement of data exchange in Europe”. The SPD declares that internal security does not end at the country’s borders and urges intensified international co-ordination on security issues, adding chillingly, “as much as possible as a preventive measure, but where necessary with repression”.

The SPD’s security policy also includes its military aims. The process of transforming the German Army into an internationally operational force is to be continued. Together with its partners in the European Union and NATO, the German Armed Forces will be deployed in all those regions of the world where “securing peace and the protection of persons” is called for.

In other words, the SPD manifesto repudiates none of the government’s previous policies aimed at dismantling social and democratic rights and participation in military conflicts. Quite the opposite. Behind the torrent of words about “social justice” and the “humanisation of society”, the SPD is making a clear political shift to the right.

It is necessary to be absolutely clear on this point in order to repudiate the claims made by Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine that it is possible to pressure the SPD to the left. The opposite is the case. The SPD is reacting to increasing discontent with its policies by intensifying its attacks on social and democratic rights.



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