

# SPD party congress united behind Germany's grand coalition

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In any initial appraisal, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) party congress, held in the German city of Karlsruhe last week, appears simply bizarre. Although the party lost its government majority in elections in September and its chairman at the beginning of November, the conference was characterised by demonstrative unanimity, instead of any critical or self-critical debate.

The congress opened with exuberant and bombastic words of praise. First, former party chairman Franz Müntefering sang the praises of outgoing chancellor Gerhard Schröder; then, Schröder responded by paying tribute to Müntefering; and finally, the new party chairman, Matthias Platzeck, praised both men, who were then treated to standing ovations lasting several minutes, endless embraces, kisses, flowers and repeated applause.

Many commentators limited themselves to superficial remarks such as “nervous kissing and cuddling in the SPD” (*Kölner Stadtanzeiger*) and a “frothy mood” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). *Die Zeit* summed up the party congress with the phrase, the SPD is “easily aroused but will soon again be neurotic.”

More important than such psychological musings are the political decisions arrived at the congress beneath the torrent of flattery and mutual pats on the shoulder. Without any significant debate and with more than 95 percent of the votes from the 515 delegates attending, the congress supported almost unanimously its grand coalition accord worked out with the right-wing union parties—Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—as well as the selection of the CDU's Angela Merkel as chancellor of the grand coalition.

The SPD thereby assumes a key role in the implementation of Merkel's government programme, which it had opposed during the recent election campaign. And under conditions in which the parties that had expressed their opposition to Merkel's programme—the SPD, the Green Party and the Left Party—obtained a clear majority of 55 percent of votes on September 18. The argument that the coalition programme is a compromise and contains much in the way of a social-democratic programme is simply hogwash. In reality, the programme is far to the right of Schröder's Agenda 2010,

which had already encountered vigorous opposition from the population as well as from numerous SPD members.

This is particularly clear in the case of the proposal to raise value-added tax by 3 per cent, a move that will hit pensioners, the unemployed and those on low incomes especially hard. As the union parties announced in the election campaign their plans for a VAT increase of 2 points, their opinion poll ratings slumped. The SPD adapted to the prevailing mood and led its election campaign with opposition to what it referred to as the “Merkel-tax” and further welfare cuts. The “Merkel-tax will be expensive!” was their slogan barely three months ago, and election supporters pasted up SPD posters with the demand, “To ensure that Germany remains social.”

Now, SPD delegates have not only cast their votes for an expansion of the Merkel-tax, but also for an increase of the working age from 65 to 67 years, cuts in commuter subsidies and a series of other measures directed against workers and the unemployed. Leading SPD figures have taken over the key ministries of finance, labour and health precisely in order to implement these social attacks.

The euphoria that occasionally erupted at the Karlsruhe congress can be explained only by the fact that the assembled delegates felt freed from the pressure to constantly justify their right-wing policies. Now, they can assign blame to the grand coalition, the obligation to compromise and the conservative union parties. Whoever in the SPD had any scruples over a particular issue in bluntly favouring the interests of employers over the interests of ordinary working people could afford to breathe again. In its alliance with the union, the Social Democrats feel strong enough to directly implement even more drastic social attacks than those so far carried out.

Gerhard Schröder and Franz Müntefering, who had brought the party to this stage in its development, congratulated themselves mutually under the applause of delegates. “Dear Gerd, you have given your services to Germany and German social-democracy!” Müntefering proclaimed and added in the warmest tones: “We all—German social-democracy—are proud of you. The SPD and Gerhard Schröder are one. We thank you from our very hearts.”

Two things above all would remain from Schröder's era and go into history: “First of all the Agenda 2010 and secondly the

policy of peace.” That, according to Müntefering, is Schröder’s lasting inheritance. “These two great things which remain, and which make us all proud of one another.”

Schröder responded with a paean of praise for Müntefering, which was just as theatrical. He identified those leading party bureaucrats who had suppressed any internal party discussion for the past one and a half years with former SPD leaders such as August Bebel, Kurt Schumacher and Willy Brandt. Any comparison between the legendary party founder Bebel—who defied Otto von Bismarck and the German emperor, and under conditions of illegality developed the SPD into a mass party—and the apparatchik Müntefering, whose party regime Rosa Luxemburg termed “barrack-room socialism” nearly a century ago, is simply grotesque.

The rhetorical mutual hymns of praise helped prevent any serious assessment of the policies implemented by the Schröder government. The congress did not deem it necessary or advisable to conduct any discussion about the seven-year rule of the SPD in coalition with the Green Party—a period that was supposed to have initiated a better and more socially responsible future.

“For innovation and justice” was the slogan of the SPD’s programme in 1998, after the end of the 16-year rule of the Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl. What followed was one attack after another on social and democratic rights. The government regarded its primary task as placing its services at the beck and call of big business. Frequently, top managers—such as Volkswagen’s Peter Hartz—were assigned the job of developing plans for welfare cuts in collaboration with high-ranking government representatives.

In addition, the refusal by the Schröder government to participate in the Bush-led war against Iraq had nothing to do with a “policy of peace.” On this issue, the SPD-Green government was consistent in representing the interests of the German imperialism, which wanted to ensure that its own interests and energy sources in the Middle East were not dominated by the US. Unable to prevent the war, the German government went on to grant Washington important logistical assistance and openly supported the subsequent occupation of the conquered country—in defiance of accepted international law.

As resistance to its social policies grew, reflected in substantial protest actions and 11 successive defeats at the polls for the SPD, Chancellor Schröder and SPD chief Müntefering intervened, in accordance with the wishes of the most influential business associations, to organise new elections in an unconstitutional manoeuvre. At the time, the SPD lagged nearly 20 points behind the CDU/CSU in opinion polls, meaning that a new election would almost inevitably result in the union parties taking power.

The situation changed, however, following the formation of the Left Party. While opinion polls registered a rapid growth in support for the Left Party, the CDU/CSU union lost support to

the extent that its right-wing, neo-liberal programme came more and more to the foreground. The planned increase in value-added tax, the appointment of the Flat Tax proponent Paul Kirchhof as financial specialist for the union, and plans to undermine the German system of health insurance put an end to Merkel’s high popularity ratings.

Schröder now felt required to intervene energetically in the election campaign and adopt a more left-wing tone to head off support for the Left Party. In the event, the CDU obtained one of the worst election results in its history. The SPD then rushed to back Merkel and assist her bid to take over as chancellor.

In the summer of this year, Chancellor Schröder had justified the premature dissolution of the German parliament (Bundestag) by arguing that he confronted considerable resistance within his own party and parliamentary group. He made clear on a number of occasions that the early election was primarily aimed at suppressing criticism of his political course.

The Karlsruhe Party Congress showed the extent of his success. There is nobody left in the SPD who is capable or willing to oppose its right-wing course. Those who call themselves the “Parliamentary Left” allowed themselves to be used as pawns in a coup through which the right-wing “Network” group were able to take control of all-important party offices. They occupied the front row at the party congress in order to pay tribute to Schröder, Müntefering and, above all, Matthias Platzeck.

Andrea Nahles, who had been nominated 14 days ago by the party executive committee for the office of general secretary—against the will of Müntefering and which led to his subsequent resignation—was obviously keen to play the “good little girl.” She refrained from standing for one of the posts as deputy chairman of the party and hurried to ostentatiously congratulate Müntefering after he had given his speech.

Platzeck was voted new party chairman with 99.4 percent of delegates’ votes, although apart from his close links to leading party figures, he is a man who has played no role of any significance in the party as a whole. The result would have put to shame the old East German (GDR) Stalinists—notorious for their near-unanimous votes for leading party figures.

The 51-year-old Platzeck grew up in the GDR and only joined the SPD 10 years ago. In contrast to other SPD politicians, he has no inhibitions when it comes to the complete dismantling of the west German welfare state—just as the social mechanisms established in the former GDR were dissolved 15 years ago. Under his leadership, the SPD has moved further to the right and is now instrumental in carrying out devastating new social attacks as part of the grand coalition.



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