

German Social Democratic Party chairman badmouths the unemployed

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Kurt Beck, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and prime minister of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, is a media professional. It would be naïve to think that his recent badmouthing of an unemployed person before a crowd of journalists was some sort of thoughtless mistake.

This is precisely how one unleashes a political campaign. Beck and the SPD are deliberately orienting towards layers of the middle class that have been hard hit by the country's social crisis and seeking to incite them against the unemployed and those dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments—the most disadvantaged layers of society.

On December 12, as part of his party's election campaign in the state of Hessian, Beck posed for photographers alongside the party's candidate, Andrea Ypsilanti, at a Christmas market place in the town of Wiesbaden. One of the spectators, 37-year-old Henrico Frank, who has been unemployed for many years, shouted at Beck, saying the SPD chairman was responsible for his inability to find work and ironically thanking him for the reactionary Hartz IV measures first introduced by the SPD.

Beck swore back at Frank, saying he did not look like a man who had done much work in his life. Beck added, "If you have a wash and a shave, you can find a job."

Beck's message was unmistakable. It is the same as that emanating from conservative and right-wing circles: "The unemployed are responsible for their own plight. They are lazy, dirty and live parasitically on government aid. Whoever really wants to work can find a job."

Frank was obviously surprised at Beck's vehemence and fell silent. The SPD head continued shaking hands for the journalists and photographers in attendance. After a few minutes, however, Frank approached Beck once more and said, "I will wash and shave and then visit you in the state chancellery." Beck replied: "Okay, do that."

In light of Beck's close links to companies in the region, it came as no surprise that his state chancellery was able to come up with a few job offers the next day. No solution, however, was provided by Beck for the remaining 147,000 unemployed persons in Rhineland-Palatinate, or the over 4 million unemployed in Germany as a whole. Instead Beck defended his abusive outburst, declaring, "The people who get excited over such a thing have no idea of the real world."

Beck has acted in a similar way on previous occasions. In June this year he attacked Hartz IV recipients for applying for the full

payments to which they are legally entitled. "There are things which one just does not do," he said. "One does not have to grab all that's there."

This from a man who has spent almost his entire adult life as a professional politician.

Just a few weeks ago he launched a so-called "debate" on the "underclass," in which he accused the unemployed and poor of a "lack of drive."

Other leading SPD figures have made similar remarks. The reference of the former chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, to German teachers as "lazy lumps" is among the better-known.

In October last year, the federal SPD-led Ministry for Economics and Labour published a brochure with the title: "Priority for the Decent—Against Abuse, Hustling and Self-aggrandizement in the Welfare State." The brochure agitated in the most aggressive manner against the unemployed, and went so far as to use phrases popularised by the Nazis—declaring that those dependent on social security could be compared to "parasites." The minister responsible for the brochure, Wolfgang Clement, had the full backing of the man who has since taken over his post, former SPD chairman Franz Müntefering.

Beck's latest remarks were enthusiastically taken up in the media. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that with his "warning to a run-down unemployed person" Beck had "accurately articulated popular opinion." The newspaper claimed the reaction of most Germans was: "Finally, someone said what [we] dared not say."

The demagoguery on display here is breathtaking. Germany's former SPD-Green coalition government showered the rich with tax cuts and stuffed billions into their pockets, while broad layers of the population were condemned to lives of poverty and unemployment through its Hartz IV measures and other cuts. Now the victims of these policies are being insulted by the very same politicians, who denounce them as dirty parasites.

The real social parasites sit in the executive committees of the big companies and banks. Along with the SPD-Green government, they plundered the welfare state for years, destroyed jobs, pushed down wages and now, at the end of the year, are filling up their Christmas stockings with special perks and bonuses—all at the expense of the rest of the population.

Beck's statements and the reaction of the media should be taken as a warning: If the unemployed are lazy parasites, they must be forced to work. For some considerable time there has been

discussion in Berlin about how to intensify the Hartz laws and compel the unemployed to accept work, no matter how poorly paid and demeaning.

Such measures have long since been implemented in the US and Great Britain. In Germany, they have been advocated up to now mainly by right-wing and conservative forces such as the prime minister of the state of Hesse, Roland Koch, who, during the election campaign of 2003, championed the so-called “Wisconsin model.” In that US state, those on welfare forego all support if they do not find and accept a job within a certain period.

The SPD are no novices when it comes to implementing policies of compulsory labour. It should be recalled that the last Social Democratic chancellor of the Weimar Republic, Hermann Müller, was toppled in 1930 after failing to slash unemployment payments. Subsequently, the SPD supported the emergency government led by Heinrich Brüning, which introduced a “voluntary work service” on August 3, 1931. Later, under Hitler, this work service was transformed into a compulsory and massively expanded hard labour scheme.

Vulgar denunciations of socially disadvantaged layers, such as those made by Beck, are a relatively new phenomenon for the postwar SPD. The party always unreservedly defended capitalism and established this as an aim of the SPD in its 1959 Godesberg program. But during the 1960s and early 1970s it regarded social reforms and social reconciliation as the best suitable means for maintaining the existing order. During this period, the SPD enjoyed considerable support in the working class, and this support reached a high point with the elevation of SPD leader Willy Brandt to the chancellorship.

The SPD ceased to carry out any meaningful social reforms after the mid-1970s, and has gradually distanced itself from its traditional social basis in the working class. This process accelerated when, after 16 years in opposition, the SPD was once again able to take over the chancellorship in 1998.

Now it has now reached an endpoint in the current grand coalition government between Germany’s conservative parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—and the SPD. The SPD leadership under Beck and Müntefering reacts to any sort of popular pressure by intensifying its anti-social policies and mobilising right-wing middle-class layers.

Beck, with his roots in the rural German state of Rhineland-Palatinate, which is dominated by wine growers and small businesses, is the living embodiment of this process. He is supported by the trade union bureaucracy, which has been collaborating in redundancies and job cuts for years. Beck can also rely on the support of the young so-called “net workers” in the SPD, who have no ideological scruples when it comes to furthering their careers in the hierarchy of the SPD.

The chairwoman-designate of the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) SPD, Hannelore Kraft, is typical of such elements in the party. The economist has been a party member since 1994.

She previously worked as a management consultant and project leader at ZENITH GmbH (Centre for Innovation and Technology in North Rhine-Westphalia). With just six years of membership, she entered the NRW state parliament as an SPD delegate. One

year later she became minister for federal and European affairs. Between 2002 and 2005, she held the post of minister for science and research. Kraft stands for a right-wing, pro-big business and elitist political course.

Opinion polls and membership numbers also reveal the gulf between the SPD and its former base in the working population.

According to a recent Forsa survey, the SPD currently has the support of just 26 percent of the electorate. In 1998, when the SPD took over government in coalition with the Green Party, it still had 755,000 members. One year ago, at the end of the coalition headed by Schröder, this figure stood at 590,000. By October of this year it had further declined to 565,000. Of the existing SPD members, 43 percent are older than 60 and only 8 percent are younger than 35.

The best example for the current state of the SPD is its regional organization in North Rhine-Westphalia. At one point, the SPD had nearly 300,000 members in the state and had powerful roots among workers employed in the region’s steel plants and coal mines. Since then, nearly all of the Ruhr area steel mills and coal mines have been shut down, with the complicity of the SPD and the unions.

The SPD suffered its worst result in over 50 years in the NRW state election of May 2005, when the party received its comeuppance for the anti-social policies of the Schröder government. Now the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia has just 155,000 members, and many local associations are no longer active.

Broad layers of the population are unfamiliar with the state leaders of the SPD, or confuse the SPD with the CDU. According to a Forsa survey published last July, 83 percent of those questioned in North Rhine-Westphalia were unable to name a single state politician. This figure rose to 95 percent amongst those working class layers which formerly voted for the SPD.

The two best-known social democrats from North Rhine-Westphalia are national ministers: Labour Minister Franz Müntefering and Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück. The third best known SPD politician in North Rhine-Westphalia in the Forsa rankings is the state prime minister, Jürgen Rüttgers. The only problem here is the fact that Rüttgers is a member of the CDU!

Beck’s tirade against an unemployed person makes absolutely clear that the SPD no longer banks on winning the confidence of its former electoral base amongst workers through social concessions. In order to implement the interests of the big concerns and banks in the face of widespread popular resistance, it is now appealing to the most backward social prejudices and the mobilization of conservative middle-class forces.



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