German Greens hold special congress on Afghanistan

Dietmar Henning, Peter Schwarz
25 September 2007

"The Green meltdown in Göppingen" and "Severe blow for the executive committee" were among the headlines in the German press this week concerning the special congress held by the Green Party last weekend in the town of Göppingen. The congress had been called on the insistence of party members to discuss the Green Party's attitude towards the deployment of the German army in Afghanistan.

At the congress, delegates voted down the motion proposed by the party executive and approved instead by 361 votes to 264 a motion put by Robert Zion, a 41-year-old delegate from Gelsenkirchen.

If one compares the two motions, it seems that the furore surrounding the vote has been highly exaggerated. The motion put by the executive committee calls for a withdrawal of German forces from the US-led OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom), and supports German participation in the NATO-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force).

The motion put by Zion hardly differs from that proposed by the executive committee. It also calls for a withdrawal of German forces from OEF, and generally supports German involvement in ISAF, but calls in addition for the withdrawal of six German Tornado fighters, which are currently carrying out surveillance missions for both the ISAF and the OEF in Afghanistan.

The Green Party executive is split on this latter issue. The same position as Zion's—i.e., opposition to the deployment of the Tornados—was defended at the conference by the co-chairman of the party, Claudia Roth, and its speaker on foreign policy, Jürgen Trittin, although they had helped draw up the executive motion that was voted down.

Three other members of the executive—party co-chairman Reinhard Bütikofer and the two Bundestag (parliament) faction chairpersons, Fritz Kuhn and Renate Künast—supported the Tornado deployment.

Because of its divisions on the issue of the Tornado deployment, the executive committee motion made no recommendation on how deputies should vote when the Afghanistan mandates come up for discussion in the Bundestag in October, preferring to leave all possibilities on the table.

It was on this issue that congress delegates took a different standpoint. The successful motion put forward by Zion explicitly called upon the party's deputies to vote "no" to any extension of the mandates, meaning that deputies could either vote "no" or abstain in the vote.

Since the German government insists on voting jointly on the ISAF and Tornado missions, the congress decision in Göttingen would amount to a rejection or abstention with regard to the ISAF mandate, although the Zion motion expressly calls for the retention of German soldiers in the ISAF mission.

The motion that was passed states that "a rapid withdrawal by the German army would result in chaos for the so far comparatively stable regions in north Afghanistan." Then the conclusion is drawn: "Although we were forced into this conflict in 2001, we cannot simply withdraw today.... As long as military security is necessary for the setting up of police and infrastructure, and as long as this cannot be done by the Afghan military or the Afghan police, then there is no justifiable reason for the departure of German army units."

Another motion calling for a rapid withdrawal of the German army from Afghanistan was clearly rejected by a large majority of congress delegates.

Under conditions where there is broad unity between the party base and its leadership over retaining German troops in Afghanistan, the fuss about the delegates' votes seems difficult to explain.

Afterwards, party leader Bütikofer sought to play down the issue, declaring to the media that the congress had not called for the withdrawal of the German army from Afghanistan. In fact, the motion that was passed calls for quite the opposite: "We say yes to ISAF, we say yes to a change of strategy, and we say yes to an increase in civil aid. But we say no to the OEF."

Several Green Party deputies have already made clear that they will defy the congress resolution when it comes to the Bundestag vote in October. Deputy Krista Sager told the *Hamburger Abendblatt*: "The reconnaissance flights by the Tornado planes cannot be the reason for voting against the extremely important ISAF mandate." Kerstin Andreae, economics spokeswoman for the Greens in the Bundestag, told the *Handelsblatt*: "I will decide according to my conscience—and I cannot vote against ISAF."

Nevertheless, the conflict, which emerged publicly at the Greens' special congress, is significant. It has less to do with political content than with the future role of the Greens.

Opposition to the German deployment in Afghanistan has been growing as violence and the toll of deaths in the country has risen. According to a recent Forsa poll, 52 percent of the German population favours a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, with just 43 percent supporting the retention of troops. Should the US make good its threats and attack Iran, a massive antiwar movement can be anticipated.

Since entering national government nine years ago, in the previous Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition, the Greens have moved so far to the right that they are no longer in a position to dominate the antiwar movement. In the figure of former foreign minister Joschka Fischer, the party provided a vital prop for the remilitarisation of German foreign policy. In fact, no other party is so closely associated with the deployment of the German army in

© World Socialist Web Site

Afghanistan as the Greens.

In particular, the so-called pragmatic wing of the party (realos), led by Bütikofer, Künast, Kuhn and the European deputy Daniel Cohn-Bendit, are contemplating a possible coalition in government alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Now they see this goal endangered.

Cohn-Bendit, who was booed during his speech at the conference, lashed out at delegates, describing the congress as a "kindergarten." He told the *taz* newspaper, "If the Greens want to go the way of fundamental opposition, then they are free do so!"

As opposed to the "pragmatic" wing in the party, the majority of delegates at the congress sought to adapt to increasing antiwar sentiment in order to be able to influence it. In an interview with *Focus*, Zion declared: "It is now said that the ability of the party to take part in government is in danger. But the issue is to be able to provide opposition. If the ability to participate in government is equated with the readiness to go to war, then one should consider what the ability to govern actually means in this country. We have not decided to retreat from Afghanistan."

The political differences between the "pragmatic" Greens and the opposition at the congress are minimal. Nevertheless, the latter are seeking to reestablish some sort of credentials for the Greens as a pacifist party.

The opposition's motion consisted of nine pages and strives to revive the old illusion that the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is devoted to preserving peace and securing reconstruction, while the violence and death toll in the country is exclusively a result of the OEF mission. There is not an attempt in the resolution to identify the real motives for the German—or American—intervention in Afghanistan. One looks in vain for terms like "oil," "gas," "Iraq" or "Iran."

The motion states that the Greens could only "credibly support ISAF if at the same time any sort of support for OEF is terminated." It demands "the immediate end to all air raids against civilian facilities, such as populated areas." In the case of ground deployments—which are not to be limited at all—the resolution states that "the protection of the civilian population must be the absolute priority."

That this myth of the "good" ISAF deployment, as opposed to the "bad" OEF mission, has nothing to do with reality was confirmed by the German NATO general, Egon Ramm, in an interview with German television just one day before the special congress. He saw no problem in leaving "Operation Enduring Freedom to concentrate exclusively on ISAF," since the spectrum of the ISAF mandate was clearly broader "than is perhaps presented and described in discussion in the Federal Republic." In other words, there is no longer any real distinction between ISAF and OEF because ISAF cooperates closely with and has taken over many tasks from the OEF troops.

The problem here for the Greens is the deployment of the Tornado aircraft. "Formally, the deployment of Tornados by the German army is strictly limited to ISAF, but under the given conditions this is impossible," the motion declares mournfully. Because "all deployments of Western combat aircraft" are controlled "by the US control centre in Qatar, the commander of OEF, US General David Rodriguez, is at the same time head of the ISAF eastern regional command." This means that Germany shares responsibility when, as a result of its reconnaissance flights, ISAF bombing missions take place in which "ever more frequently innocent men, women, and children are killed or hurt."

The attempts by the Green congress majority to dissociate themselves from the consequences of the war in Afghanistan, while at the same time staying faithful to ISAF, recall the manoeuvres of the Left Party led by Oskar Lafontaine, which tries to dissociate itself from the policies of the Social Democrats without breaking with the programme and political conceptions of social democracy. Former SPD chairman Lafontaine is assembling remnants from the SPD, the trade union bureaucracy and former East German Stalinists to patch together an organisation intent on assisting the SPD to take power—with the Left Party as preferred coalition partner.

Robert Zion, who drafted the motion, is a suitable candidate for such a project—whether in the form of an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition, or in collaboration with the Left Party. Born in 1966, he is a member of Attac, which has close links to the SPD, and he ranks Lafontaine and former SPD chancellor Willy Brandt among his role models. He intends to draft a motion for the next national conference of the Greens calling for a radical break with the Agenda 2010 anti-welfare measures—a favourite topic of the Left Party.

In his *Focus* interview, Zion describes the significance of the party congress as follows: "The era of Fischer is finally at an end. We are not a project lasting merely a generation. The founding generation, the former radicals of 1968, have their organised march through the institutions behind them. But they alone cannot determine the line of the party. Some leading figures have lost their bearings."

For his part, Lafontaine lavishly praised the vote of the delegates at the Green congress. Green foreign policy is once again based on the principles of international law, he exclaimed.

Lafontaine himself has long experience in exploiting the peace movement for his own ends. At the end of the 1970s, he stood at the head of mass demonstrations opposing the stationing of nuclear missiles in Germany, in opposition to the SPD chancellor at that time, Helmut Schmidt. Lafontaine was keen to ensure that the SPD did not lose all control of that particular generation of youth and protesters. The Greens emerged in this period from elements of the 1968 generation who initially backed Willy Brandt's SPD, but then became disillusioned under his successor, Schmidt.

The SPD-Green coalition of 1998, which witnessed the first collaboration between the two parties in national government, was essentially Lafontaine's own project. However, the turn to the right by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Vice Chancellor Fischer was so rapid and far-reaching that Lafontaine feared the party could lose all influence over the working class and youth. This was his motive for breaking with the SPD and forming the Left Party, which has set itself the task of preventing the emergence of a genuinely independent, socialist movement.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site