

German Social Democratic congress upholds austerity program and coalition with conservatives

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Two major decisions were taken by the 480 delegates and 45-member executive committee at the congress of the Social Democratic Party held in Hamburg last weekend: that the SPD would remain loyal to the reactionary social policies introduced by the previous government of SPD leader Gerhard Schröder, and that it would continue its participation in Germany's ruling grand coalition, consisting of the SPD, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU).

A few verbal concessions with regard to social issues were made at the congress in order to placate the trade union and social policy wing of the SPD, generally referred to by the media as the party's left wing. In any event, such concessions will largely remain on paper. All resolutions passed at the congress are subject both to "financial considerations" and the agreement of the CDU/CSU in the grand coalition.

The aim of the congress was to put a halt to the rapid decline in popular support for the SPD and restore its formerly close links with the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB).

During the seven years in power of the SPD-Green Party coalition under Chancellor Schröder, many social democrats and trade unionists quit the party and went on to form the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism, now known as "The Left."

Since then, some DGB-affiliated unions have flirted with "The Left." A split by the unions from the SPD would make it more difficult for both the trade union and SPD bureaucracies to maintain control over the working class.

The task of the party congress was to prevent this and bolster the links between the DGB and SPD by reemphasising the latter's adherence to Schröder's anti-welfare "Agenda 2010" program, while making a few token concessions.

Two former Social Democratic chancellors, Helmut Schmidt and Schröder, laid down the guidelines for the conference. In *Spiegel Online*, Schmidt praised Schröder for his reform policies. "We are profiting from a worldwide development in which we would have had a much reduced share without Schröder's Agenda," Schmidt said.

Schröder gave the opening address on Friday, declaring: "I can only advise remaining faithful to the basic principles of the Agenda 2010." He said he had the impression "that this was the case." Schröder further called for the party to remain in the grand coalition. The program of the SPD, he said, could be implemented

only "in government."

He finished with an appeal "to ensure that the chairman of the party is strengthened at this congress, and that those who have to tackle the difficult business of government can return to Berlin with additional support."

This is exactly the path the congress took.

In his long-winded, two-hour speech to the congress, SPD Chairman Kurt Beck looked back "with pride" at what had so far been achieved, both by the previous SPD-Green government and the two-year-old grand coalition regime.

Beck was forced to conclude that the "achievements" meant that the distribution of income and wealth in Germany "had widened instead of developing in a fair manner." According to Beck, however, the job of the SPD was not to reverse this process. "We have to fight to ensure that people understand our policies," he declared.

Although his speech paid lip service to social issues, Beck repeatedly made clear that there would be no break with the Agenda 2010. "We can and should never understand security in such a way that there is a state, a community that provides everything and takes up the burden of everybody's worries. No, that would only suffocate individual responsibility," he declared, in the manner of Schröder himself.

Beck stressed that there should be no misunderstanding regarding his recent conflict with Labour Minister and Vice Chancellor Franz Müntefering over the issue of extending benefits for the unemployed. The dispute was not about a fundamental change of course, he reassured the congress.

Beck said that his main objective was to strengthen the "stabilization of the Agenda policies" through a series of new social cuts. He described the proposal made by Müntefering for a general retirement age of 67 as "inevitable in light of the international competitive situation."

He added that it was impossible not to incur opposition "over the fact that wages or pensions are not increased," but concluded that, as a politician, one just had to press on.

Beck characterized as "outrageous idiocy" claims made by some CDU politicians and media outlets that the SPD was shifting to the left at the congress.

The delegates responded by re-electing him as chairman of the party by a margin of over 95 percent.

The executive motion “Reforms for a Social Germany,” which called for an extension of jobless benefits, was nodded through by the delegates on Friday without debate.

Müntefering spoke on the following day. In an address that was greeted with jubilant applause, he put forward a proposal for unspecified minimum wage levels to be made applicable to all industries, “if possible.” He also proposed the introduction of a legal minimum wage, to be determined by a commission with representatives from both management and the unions.

In fact, the emergence of a massive low-wage sector, particularly in German service industries, is the legacy of the Schröder government and its grand coalition successor. Wages of five euros or less have become commonplace, and the demand for a minimum wage has been raised by the unions for some time. However, its introduction will do little to change the situation for low-pay workers or significantly lessen the pressure on better-paid workers to accept wage cuts.

The so-called “SPD left” played a major role at the Hamburg congress. It consists of those forces who seek to provide a left cover for the party through criticism of certain social and political decisions, and thereby bolster the party’s credentials in the working class.

Their role in “holding the party together” was touted by “left” executive committee member Andrea Nahles, who was elected as Beck’s deputy by 74.8 percent of the delegates, alongside Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (85.5 percent), who had headed the chancellery office of Schröder and was an architect of the Agenda 2010 program, and Economics Minister Peer Steinbrück (75.4 percent), a hard-line defender of Agenda 2010.

“I must help keep the shop together,” Nahles told the *Welt Online*, and spoke of reforming the Agenda 2010 “in one place,” adding that “further shifts of emphasis” were “not on the horizon.”

Nahles dissociated herself from the demand to “get rid of Hartz IV”—a program of drastic social welfare cuts implemented by the previous SPD-Green government and continued by the grand coalition. She said this demand had nothing to do with her politics, which stressed “fairness,” but also took account of what was “financially possible.”

The so-called “lefts” muted their avowed opposition to government plans to privatize German Railways. After an intervention by Beck, who demanded that the congress back the newly elected executive, the delegates voted through the executive motion for a so-called “partial privatization.”

The “lefts” were able to push through two measures against the wishes of the executive: the abolition of tax privileges for company cars and a speed limit of 130 on German motorways. There is, however, no chance that either proposal will be approved by the SPD’s coalition partners.

The right-wing orientation of the SPD was most evident on the issue of war. The debate on the unpopular deployment of German soldiers in Afghanistan ran along the lines laid down by the party executive. Its motion for an extension of the missions was accepted by a large majority of delegates after little discussion. There was no mention of US preparations for war against Iran.

The executive’s so-called “Peace Policy” motion reads: “We support the path of political regulation of conflicts and reject any

militarization of thinking on this issue.” However, it goes on to accuse Tehran, rather than Washington, of “militarization of thinking.”

At another point, the executive condemns Iran’s “scandalous sallies against Israel’s right to exist” and demands that it eliminate “the doubts about the peaceful character of its nuclear program and accept the offer of negotiation and cooperation made by the international community.”

Four years ago, the SPD put up at least verbal opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. Today, the party cringes from any criticism of American war policy.

The party has also shifted further to the right in a number of other fields of policy. Police should be given “the necessary means” and “the necessary training,” the congress demanded, and called for the Criminal Investigation Office to be given “more authority.”

The congress refused to criticize the policy of police searches of private computers, and Beck indicated that the SPD was prepared to support the use of the German army for domestic purposes, something that is currently forbidden by the German Constitution.

The basic policy statement adopted on Sunday contains numerous passages extolling the virtues of social security, a broad welfare state, freedom, justice, solidarity, etc. Even the term “democratic socialism,” which had been ditched by the party, has been revived under Beck. But this is only window dressing for the continuing turn to the right by German Social Democracy, and will do nothing to reverse its decline.

The chairman of the German trade union federation, Michael Sommer, was gushing in his praise for the conference, which he described in the *Berliner Zeitung* as a “strategic reorientation of the Social Democrats.”

Sommer made clear that the main purpose of the revived social rhetoric is to shore up the SPD’s alliance with the trade unions. In fact, the real content of such an alliance was shown in the run-up to the conference, when both Beck and Sommer viciously attacked striking German train drivers. Together, they are determined to crush any independent movement of the working class.



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