

German Social Democratic Party in crisis

Dietmar Henning
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The so-called “Future Convention” held by the Social Democratic Party in the city of Nuremberg on Saturday May 31 revealed the true extent of the crisis gripping the SPD after ten years in government.

Against a background of social polarization and increasing poverty, largely due to the SPD’s own policies, this former “People’s Party” is now pulling out the stops to prevent a massive slump in its popular support. According to current opinion polls, just 20 percent of the electorate would vote for the SPD.

The Future Convention was aimed at providing a platform for the embattled SPD chairman Kurt Beck to publicly recover some ground. Prior to the convention there had been disputes in the party’s executive committee over whether Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier should also be allowed to give a comparably long address to the gathering. In common with virtually all German Foreign Ministers, who are able to maintain a certain distance from domestic and social affairs, Steinmeier has a positive rating in opinion polls. He is being put forward as a possible alternative to Beck for the SPD’s choice for chancellor following parliamentary elections due next year. As it turned out, the executive committee preferred to give the impression of party unity and decided to give Beck a last chance in Nuremberg.

In the carefully stage-managed proceedings, Beck strode onto the podium surrounded by a train of supporters, as 3,000 convention delegates applauded wildly. The moderator of the event declared over the microphone in epochal tones, “The future of the SPD can now begin.” The walls of the convention were draped with the slogan, “Advancement and Justice”—in that order. One and a half years ago it was Beck himself who had generated a debate about the so-called “underclass” in Germany, when he accused the unemployed and poor of “lacking readiness to advance themselves,” i.e., of simply being lazy.

After entering the hall Beck delivered his speech. For most of the press it was “far, far, far too long” and also was “without orientation,” “meandering” over 170 years of German history.

At the start of his speech Beck exercised some self-criticism. He made a few comments on the advantages of introducing a minimum wage, withdrawing from dependence on nuclear fuel, and investing in education, research and families. At the same time the SPD was determined, he insisted, to reorganize the

federal budget by 2011. This means no change to existing social policy—a message that relieved federal Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD). Beck’s remarks mean that any measures to improve the incomes of low wage earners will not be implemented for at least three years.

Beck also stressed that he would not participate in the “hysteria to reduce taxes” unleashed by the SPD’s coalition partner, the conservative Christian Social Union. Faced with the prospect of heavy losses in the Bavarian state election due in September, the pro-business CSU has recently put forward proposals for a tax reduction program amounting to 28 billion euros.

The press commentaries on Beck’s speech, which consisted of empty promises and exhortations to hang on, combined mockery with pity. *Zeit-Online* wrote: “Beck fights, speaks energetically and only occasionally loses his way in subordinate clauses and false images. For Beck it amounted to a reasonable speech.”

Several newspapers took up one event in particular. After Beck’s speech the convention moderator called out over the microphone: “Kurt Beck: 78 dynamic minutes” which *Spiegel-Online* described as “pure satire.” At the end of the proceedings the party’s General Secretary Hubertus Heil even borrowed the battle cry of the US Democratic Candidate Barack Obama and shouted into the microphone: “Say after me: Yes we can!” Following an utterly desultory response from the delegates the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was forced to conclude: “No, they can’t.”

It would be wrong, however, to make Beck alone responsible for the dire state of SPD. In fact the prime minister of the state of Rhineland-Pfälz and his speech at the “Future Convention” are expressions and symptoms of the huge crisis gripping the party.

The SPD is intent on maintaining its policy of welfare and social cuts but is seeking to dress them up with left-sounding verbiage in the 15 months left before the next Bundestag election. The attempt will not succeed, however. After 16 years in opposition the SPD was able to take power in 1998 in a coalition with the Greens on the basis of presenting itself as the party of the “little man.” After ten years in government—seven in its alliance with the Greens and three with the conservative Christian Union parties—the SPD is seen by broad sections of the population as the party responsible for devastating social

cuts and growing poverty under conditions where profits and the incomes at the top of society have soared.

The attempt by the SPD to now present itself as a force for social justice amounts to trying to square the circle. Who today is prepared to believe that the SPD stands for “Advancement and Justice”? The party’s Agenda 2010, worked out by all of the senior social democrats who occupy leading posts today, represented the most far-reaching assault on the German welfare and social state in post war history.

“We are the party of the centre,” Beck declared in Nuremberg. But his problem is that this centre is now crumbling under conditions in which many workers who formerly earned a reasonable salary are confronted with poverty and insecurity.

This dilemma is reflected in the SPD’s ambivalent relationship to the Left Party. In recent weeks Beck has twisted and turned on precisely this issue, whereby every change of tack on his part has resulted in a further slump for himself and the SPD in opinion polls.

The Left Party, led by former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine, seeks to reanimate all the social reformist illusions that the SPD buried when it introduced its Agenda 2010 program. While the Left Party shares power in a number of German states, it is not involved in the federal government—allowing the party some leeway to pose as an official opposition.

But all the indicators show that if the SPD continues to refuse an alliance with the Left Party it could be excluded from federal government for a long time. An alternative coalition with the free market Free Democratic Party and the Greens is unlikely so long as Guido Westerwelle remains head of the FDP. At present the SPD heads just five of the sixteen state governments in Germany: in Rhineland-Pfälz as majority party, in Berlin in an alliance with the Left Party, in Bremen with the Greens, and in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with the CDU.

Should the SPD categorically exclude any coalition with the Left Party it is condemned to relying on the conservative union parties, which for their part are also prepared to form coalitions with the FDP, and more recently the Greens. However, if the SPD holds open the possibility of a coalition with the Left Party it will immediately come under fire from the right wing inside its own party, which is still dominated by the type of anticommunist ideology cultivated during the cold war.

Prior to the Hesse state election in January, Beck declared that he was firmly opposed to any co-operation with the Left Party. He then went on to withdraw this statement after the election. This unleashed a vehement reaction from the SPD right wing, which indicated it would prefer to back the conservative Hesse Prime Minister Roland Koch (CDU) than bow down to the will of the electorate.

Following the recent nomination of Gesine Schwan as the SPD’s candidate for the post of Federal President, it appeared

as if Beck was once again tending towards closing ranks with the Left Party. Schwan can only be elected by the Presidential Election Council with the help of votes from the Greens and Left Party. The union parties and FDP support her rival: the current president, Horst Köhler. Schwan also announced she would seek the support of the Left Party.

Once again the right wing in the SPD reacted with venom, this time through the figure of Beck’s predecessor as party chairman, Franz Müntefering, who demanded a firm party resolution excluding any cooperation with the Left Party after the 2009 elections. Once again Beck backed down. In Nuremberg he announced that the SPD was ruling out any cooperation at a federal level with the Left Party.

A number of commentators cite Beck’s zigzag course as the main reason for the decline in the fortunes of the SPD. The party, they write, has lost any sense of credibility. However, such an analysis is utterly superficial. Beck’s inability to arrive at any firm position with regard to the Left Party is bound up with the fact that it is impossible to reconcile any policies in the interest of the working population with support for the capitalist free market.

The globalisation of production has stripped away the basis for any type of reform. Politics in any respective country is determined first and foremost not by national governments but rather by transnational companies and major international finance institutions. They are now able to play one country off against another and use the low level of wages in China and other parts of the world to cut wages and social standards across the globe.

Under these conditions the SPD led by Gerhard Schröder, which introduced the Agenda 2010 and anti-welfare Hartz IV laws, was transformed from a party of social reconciliation into an instrument of social confrontation. Based on its policy of reducing taxes for the rich and big business, the Schröder government mutated into nothing less than an extended arm of the financial oligarchy. The same development has also been seen in the case of the Left Party, which has shared government in Berlin for the past seven years. No other German state has introduced such drastic cuts in public service and social benefits.

This truth is more powerful than any made-for-the-media spectacles or election campaigns. Kurt Beck’s latest appearance in Nuremberg is symptomatic of the profound crisis gripping the SPD and the entire German parliamentary system.



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