

# German Social Democrats in free-fall

## Right-wing seeks to topple party chairman

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In the past few weeks, longstanding conflicts in the Social Democratic Party have reached a boiling point. Just this week, SPD Chairman Kurt Beck referred journalists to the “destructive campaign” being carried out against him. The way he is being treated is “obscene,” he told the magazine *Der Spiegel*, adding, “I would at least like to be taken somewhat seriously.”

At a meeting of the SPD regional organisation in Berlin, the SPD chairman affirmed his claim to the party’s leadership and said, “I am standing firm.” He did not want to “creep behind a tree.” He then went on to describe his unnamed critics as “cowardly.”

This Tuesday, he appealed for the loyalty of the entire parliamentary (Bundestag) faction and stressed, “What is clear is that I will fight.” He continued, “If I should be part of the problem—I am not stuck to my post.” This then was interpreted as a roundabout way of threatening his resignation—a position Beck quickly denied. Once again, he said, he had been deliberately misinterpreted.

While the conflicts in the SPD are not new, they are now assuming increasingly antagonistic forms in a party that is suffering a severe loss of membership and a slump in popularity, according to opinion polls.

The decline in the fortunes of the SPD can be traced back to the anti-welfare, pro-business policies introduced by the former SPD-Green Party coalition led by ex-chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD). His coalition (1998-2005) introduced the despised Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV laws, which have in a short time created a huge cheap-wage and precarious job market. Since then, opposition in the population has been growing against his “reform agenda” and its political godfather—the SPD.

Initially, such opposition took the form of large demonstrations and protests. The SPD then suffered a series of humiliating defeats in state elections. The reaction of the former Schröder leadership was to call for new elections in 2005 based on posing a take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum to the electorate. He was ready to hand over power to the conservative opposition rather than give way to popular opposition to his reform programme.

The leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Angela Merkel, thought she could exploit the widespread discontent with the SPD-Green coalition for a further lurch to the right. In her own election campaign in 2005, she announced an increase in value-added tax, tax cuts for the rich and additional welfare cuts. The immediate result was a slump in support for her party, which meant she nearly lost the election.

Despite the fact that there existed an electoral majority for a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, in the autumn of 2005, Merkel went on to form a grand coalition with the SPD in order to improve her chances of being able to implement her unpopular political programme.

In the grand coalition, Franz Müntefering (SPD) took over the post of Gerhard Schröder and stepped up the Agenda reform course. He personally called for an increase in the retirement age to 67 years. This only precipitated the decline of the SPD. This spring, the party executive announced that party membership stood at 532,800. This represents a loss

of nearly 400,000 since the reunification of Germany nearly two decades ago. Entire local organisations have been disbanded through lack of members. The SPD youth organisation, which totalled 330,000 under former chancellor Willy Brandt, has lost 85 percent of its membership.

At the same time, the influence of the recently formed Left Party has grown. The Left Party was created last year through the merger of the east German Party of Democratic Socialism and the Election Alternative organisation (WASG) based in west Germany. The party is represented in the Bundestag and in 10 of Germany’s 16 state parliaments and is now the third biggest party in the Republic, ranking in front of the Greens. The leadership of the party, Oscar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, have been able to exploit the growing unpopularity of the SPD even though their party has carried out policies in power that are in stark contrast to its election promises. The Left Party currently shares power in Berlin (with the SPD) and in many east German towns and cities.

Electoral support for the Left Party has grown while the SPD has plunged in opinion polls, which currently give the party only 20 percent approval. The Left Party is able to outpoll the SPD in many regions in the east of the country and has been able to enter a number of west German state parliaments in recent elections at its first showing.

Under these conditions, SPD leader Beck demanded some “readjustments” to Agenda 2010 to relieve the plight of older workers dependent on miserly Hartz IV payments. He has also argued in favour of slightly easing the rules regarding the increased retirement age. Beck has stressed that he regards such “retrospective improvements” as fully in line with the principles of the Agenda policy, which he is determined to continue to implement. In fact, the practical consequences of the changes he proposes are minimal. They would do little to relieve the threat of poverty for older and retired workers under conditions where bad news in the form of rapidly soaring inflation, more job losses and further welfare cuts are a daily occurrence.

Beck has sought to implement a few cosmetic changes in order to undermine support for the Left Party. But the concessions have had an opposite effect. Lafontaine and Gysi responded by declaring in triumph: “We are the most influential party. All the other parties react to the policies we advocate.”

Beck carried out a further shift at the end of January following the success of the Left Party in state elections in Hesse and Lower Saxony—two former strongholds of the SPD. In both states, the Left Party won enough votes to enter the state parliaments. Before the Hesse election, both Beck and the Hesse SPD state chair Andrea Ypsilanti had categorically excluded any cooperation with the Left Party. After the election, however, it was clear that a majority to oust the sitting right-wing CDU government was only possible when the SPD received the support of the Left Party. Beck then changed his position and gave Ypsilanti a green light to seek the support of the Left Party to enable her to take over as state prime minister.

This was all too much for the right wing within the SPD. The right-wing

SPD fraction, the “Seeheim circle,” went into action and campaigned vigorously against Ypsilanti, refusing to support her candidacy as prime minister. The group also stepped up their attacks on Beck.

Then in March, the Left Party also won enough votes to enter the Hamburg state parliament. The former mayor of the city, Klaus von Dohnanyi (SPD), reacted by declaring that “any collaboration with the Left Party in whatever form” was unthinkable. The SPD and the Greens then offered their services to enable the CDU to acquire a majority in Hamburg, and the social democrats went on to support the creation of the first-ever state government consisting of a coalition between the CDU and the Greens.

While the right wing in the SPD has carried out hysterical attacks on the Left Party and called for its systematic exclusion, its leading representatives have no problems with the old Stalinist cadres of the PDS (formerly the East German state ruling party, the SED). In fact, some SPD right-wingers have pointed out that the present crisis could have been avoided if the SPD had successfully absorbed the middle- and lower-ranking cadre of the SED following reunification. It is precisely these layers that now constitute the backbone of the Left Party in the east of the country. Klaus von Dohnanyi himself worked closely with leading members of the PDS when he took part in the setting up of special economic zones in the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania four years ago.

The SPD is well aware of the track record of the Left Party (case in point, Berlin), but the fact that the Left Party has called for the reversal of the anti-welfare Hartz laws is enough for the party to be treated as a pariah by the right wing. Any party that takes up social questions and the growing trend towards social inequality—even in the limited and superficial manner of the Left Party—is to be shunned and excluded from the political mainstream.

In other words: while the present campaign is being directed against the Left Party, its real target is the electorate and working population. There must be no accommodation in official political circles to the growing popular opposition to government policy. The criticism of Beck is that he is too weak, too soft, too flexible and too ready to compromise.

The SPD right wing regards the party apparatus as an instrument to discipline the population and ensure peace and stability for the ruling elite. Its response to pressure from within its ranks is repression. This has a long tradition in the SPD. Since voting for war credits nearly a century ago, the SPD has played a crucial role in times of crisis and intervened to rescue the bourgeois order. Its first priority is the defence of the state and state interests—even if the party itself goes to the dogs.

This is where Frank Walter Steinmeier comes in. As the factional fights in the party have heated up, the influence of this 52-year-old SPD apparatchik has grown. In the course of his political career, Germany’s current foreign minister, deputy chancellor and deputy chairman of the SPD has never been elected to any position through a popular vote. He is nothing less than the living embodiment of a social-democratic civil servant.

As a close ally of Gerhard Schröder, Steinmeier led the state chancellery of Lower Saxony in the mid-1990s. He then took over as head of Schröder’s federal chancellery and liaised with the intelligence services. During Schröder’s government, he drew up strategy papers for the reform of the pension and health schemes, and played a key role in the drawing up of the Agenda 2010 and Hartz reforms.

Steinmeier’s ascent in the SPD corresponds to the transformation of the party from a political organisation that had previously sought a certain form of social reconciliation and dialogue into a pure organ of state aimed at disciplining the population.

However, one problem remains for the SPD: there are still elections being held, and the SPD continues to suffer defeats at the hands of the electorate. Part of this growing discontent is expressed in increased votes

for the Left Party. There is, therefore, a growing political lobby that warns that the exclusion of the Left Party cannot be maintained and could in the long run prove counterproductive.

The decision of the SPD executive a few weeks ago to nominate Gesine Schwan as its candidate for federal president represented a new stage in the current conflict. Schwan could only be elected president with the support of votes from the Greens and the Left Party, and her election would be an important signal of the possibility of a coalition between the SPD, Greens and Left Party at a federal level. On a number of occasions in the past, presidential elections have played an important role in changing the German political constellation.

Once again, Kurt Beck switched tack. For a long time, he had indicated that the SPD would refrain from standing its own candidate and would support a second term for the sitting president, but then he announced his support for the candidacy of Schwan.

The fact that sections of the ruling elite are seriously considering incorporating the Left Party into government is bound up with the country’s worsening social crisis. Millions in Germany have been hard hit by declining wages, growing inflation and precarious working conditions. Growing discontent could explode into open conflict at any time, and the Left Party, which enjoys close relations with sections of the trade union bureaucracy, may prove necessary to suppress popular resistance. This has already taken place in Berlin where an SPD-Left Party coalition in the Senate has implemented unprecedented cuts to wages, jobs and social gains.

Although Beck had already contemplated cooperation with the Left Party at the start of the year, the opposition to him from inside the SPD has grown. While this seems paradoxical, it has a simple cause. A so-called “left government” would have the task of intensifying the attacks on social gains and dismantling democratic rights—as did the SPD-Green coalition a decade earlier. A chancellor Beck would not be up to such a task. This is why the selection of Gesine Schwan as the party’s candidate for president goes hand in hand with the anointing of Frank Walter Steinmeier as its candidate for chancellor. It is only a matter of time before the decision is made public.

While the right wing in the SPD has been able to intervene in the current conflict in an openly aggressive and arrogant manner in which they have made their contempt for the electorate clear, the response of the party’s so-called “lefts” has been utterly cowardly.

None of the “lefts” such as Andrea Ypsilanti and Andrea Nahles have put up any sort of opposition to the right wing. A leading member of the SPD—right-winger Wolfgang Clement—actually called for a vote against Ypsilanti in the Hesse election campaign, but nobody moved to ensure his expulsion from the party. Instead, all sorts of manoeuvres and political deals were struck behind the scenes, which simply allowed the right wing to dominate the debate in the media.

In particular, the Left Party has made clear that it will vigorously avoid articulating growing popular discontent. This was the case 10 years ago when the current Left Party leader, Oskar Lafontaine, threw in the towel as SPD economics minister. When Chancellor Schröder declared at the time that he was not prepared to carry out policies that adversely affected big business, Lafontaine just packed his bags and left, leaving Schröder to dominate the government and the SPD.

Lafontaine resigned and withdrew from the political arena only to become active once again when the popular resistance to the Agenda programme threatened to get out of control. In his current alliance with the PDS, Lafontaine is intent on ensuring that a growing political radicalisation among broad layers of the population remains trapped within the blinkers of social reformist illusions.

With their complete political cowardice in relation to the SPD right wing, the so-called left has once again served to underline the longstanding break between the SPD and the broad working masses of the

population. The current conflicts in the party are part and parcel of its process of decay, which, from the standpoint of social progress, is long overdue.



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