

Germany: Divisions widen in the Social Democratic Party

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The factional struggle inside the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) is daily becoming more confrontational. The dispute primarily concerns the attitude to be taken towards the Left Party. But behind this lies a far more fundamental question: How to deal with the growing resistance to the anti-social policies of “Agenda 2010.”

Ever since the SPD entered government in alliance with the Greens 10 years ago and began slashing social spending under Agenda 2010, it has faced growing opposition from the working population. When it became clear that mass demonstrations against Agenda 2010 were having no effect—and were just being used by the trade unions to let off steam—many saw the ballot box as a way to make clear their displeasure.

The SPD subsequently lost votes in 11 consecutive state elections, whereupon then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called an early general election and effectively handed over control of the federal government to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in the form of a grand coalition between the conservative parties (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union) and the SPD.

In the grand coalition, the SPD remained responsible for social policy, upholding the thrust of Agenda 2010. Resistance began to take the form of large-scale strikes over wages. The unions, for their part, have taken pains to isolate each of these wages struggles and prevent the development of a broad social and political movement against the government.

The majority of the SPD leadership wants to continue implementing these anti-social policies regardless of electoral losses, thereby accepting the destruction of broad sections of their own party. Foreign Minister Steinmeier and former economics minister Clement are following the tradition of Schröder’s “take your medicine and shut up” approach, suppressing any internal party opposition or criticism. They regard the party as an instrument of state for disciplining the population.

Others warn of the consequences, drawing attention to the rapid decline of the party, which has lost half its membership since the days of Willy Brandt in the 1970s, when the SPD had 1 million members. According to recent figures, the party is presently losing between 5 and 6 percent of its membership

each year. Many local party organisations and even entire subdistricts have been dissolved or amalgamated due to a lack of members.

In light of this situation, sections of the party establishment are extremely concerned that growing social opposition could find expression outside the SPD, becoming more radical and even taking on revolutionary forms. Many SPD functionaries still recall the 1960s, when the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (APO) developed, flowing into a youth revolt as well as mass strikes that shook the foundations of West Germany. Only the lack of any viable political perspective on the part of the student leaders and a political about-face by the SPD under Willy Brandt made it possible to stabilise the situation.

For this reason, the so-called “lefts” in the SPD are calling for a few revisions to Agenda 2010 and seeking the collaboration of the Left Party. In fact, these “lefts” are concerned only with moderating the most draconian social attacks in order to implement welfare cuts in such a way that popular resistance can be kept under control. They are by no means seeking any fundamental change in course.

Although the factional struggles are becoming sharper, and could even lead to the break-up of the party, the differences are of a purely tactical nature. None of the “lefts” was ready in the past, or is ready now, to mount a serious and principled fight against the social cuts of Agenda 2010. For them, the issue is not “for or against Agenda 2010,” but only how and in which political constellation these policies can be implemented in the face of popular resistance.

SPD party leader Kurt Beck is trying desperately to hold the opposing factions together. But the rift that runs through the party is becoming visibly wider.

It is in this context that recent events in the state of Hesse should be viewed. The right-wing Christian Democratic Union state legislature under Roland Koch was voted out in January, but the SPD and the Greens failed to win a majority. Since then, Hesse SPD leader Andrea Ypsilanti has been trying to establish an SPD-Green Party minority government supported by the Left Party. Such attempts failed in the spring because of the vehement opposition of SPD right-wingers.

Kurt Beck’s statement that “decisions about coalitions are made locally” gave Ypsilanti the green light to mount a second

attempt to become state premier with the support of the Left Party. Last Wednesday, the SPD regional party executive in Hesse agreed to a timetable for a change of power in the state capital Wiesbaden, outlining a plan to hold SPD membership meetings and a state convention.

One day later, the federal party leadership released a statement expressing its “serious doubts” about any collaboration with the Left Party, pointing out that decisions in Hesse affected “the common interests of the SPD” and warning that the Hesse comrades had an “overall responsibility to the SPD.”

The SPD right wing is highlighting the fact that in her election campaign Ypsilanti excluded any cooperation with the Left Party, and is accusing her of breaking her promise.

It is presently unclear whether Ypsilanti’s attempts to reach an accommodation with the Left Party will prevail, or whether the barrage being put up by the SPD right wing will succeed. What is certain is that the events in Hesse will affect the future orientation of the SPD.

Meanwhile, the Left Party in Hesse is offering its services to the SPD as a reliable partner, signalling its support for the SPD’s state leader on an almost daily basis. A Left Party congress at the end of August is aimed at ensuring that the membership pledges its unconditional support for the SPD. The Left Party leadership is even opposing the demands of some party members that the SPD commit itself to “fundamental left-wing policies” and that SPD right-wingers, such as the SPD’s deputy regional chairman, Jürgen Walter, not be included in any state government supported by the Left Party.

The congress resolution submitted by the Left Party regional leadership laconically states: “By supporting the election of a [new] state premier, the Left Party will help bring into office a state government of the SPD and the Greens.” The comprehensive nature of the blank cheque that the Left Party is writing for the SPD was made clear by one of its Hesse state deputies, Hermann Schaus. He is quoted in the press as saying, “If the Left Party is to elect Ypsilanti as state premier, it also seems logical to me that we should confirm her cabinet. Those who say A, must also say B.”

Such opportunist formulations are to be heard wherever the Left Party exercises government responsibility. In Berlin, where the Left Party has sat for seven years in the state legislature, the party justifies every anti-social measure by referring to “practical constraints.” It was no different in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, where the Left Party sat in government for two legislative periods as junior partner of the SPD, leaving behind social devastation.

Just how much the Left Party is the true offspring of the SPD became clear at the Left Party’s Saarland state convention. At the beginning of the gathering, Oskar Lafontaine—a former leader of the SPD and SPD state premier from 1985 to 1998, who now leads the Left Party—welcomed “many old companions.”

Most of the Left Party’s members in the Saarland formerly belonged to the SPD and still regard themselves as social democrats. For example, Regional Chairman Rolf Linsler was an SPD functionary for 35 years and state leader of the Verdi trade union. In August last year, he crossed over from the SPD to the Left Party, becoming its Saarland state chairman after just one month.

Before Lafontaine had even stepped to the microphone, where he used his 90-minute-long address to proclaim the Left Party as the continuation of social democracy, he drew journalists’ attention to a multiplicity of “social democratic guests and friends.”

“At the front,” he noted, “sits Eugen Roth, the leader of the German Trade Union Federation in the Saarland and SPD deputy regional chair.” He continued, “Further back can be seen the mayor of Neunkirchen, Fritz Decker—naturally a social democrat.” As one press account noted, “The introductions obviously gave him great pleasure.”

With 92.4 percent support, the delegates backed Lafontaine as the party’s lead candidate in state elections next year. The SPD and Left Party in Saarland are currently even, according to opinion polls.

In his speech, Lafontaine repeatedly offered to cooperate with the SPD, but stressed that this had to take place “on an equal footing.” He insisted that if the Left Party were to overtake the SPD—which is by no means ruled out—the SPD would be obliged to support State Premier Lafontaine. Just as Lafontaine 30 years earlier used the SPD to climb the political ladder, he is now using the Left Party in the Saarland to climb to the top in federal politics.

This former SPD leader left no doubt that the Left Party is a bureaucratic construction aimed at keeping social democracy alive. He regards the decline of the SPD as a central problem of bourgeois rule, since this party has played a key role maintaining bourgeois order in all important crises of the past.



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