

Germany: Right wing seizes leadership of the SPD

International situation

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11 September 2008

The essence of a thing must also be expressed in its appearance—so teaches the philosopher Hegel. And this also applies in politics. The way in which Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has been anointed as the Social Democratic Party's candidate for chancellor in next year's federal elections, and how the elected party leader Kurt Beck was removed and replaced by Franz Müntefering, speaks volumes about the nature of this party.

The change of leadership took the form of an internal party coup. Not even the leading SPD members meeting last weekend in a conference were involved. They were presented with a fait accompli and were taken completely by surprise. The change in the most important leadership positions occurred without discussion in any party committees. The membership did not have the slightest influence on the outcome.

A tiny circle around Steinmeier and Müntefering acted in the style of a conspiracy. First, they circulated the demand—immediately taken up by the media—that a decision about the nomination of the chancellor candidate could not be postponed until the end of the year, knowing full well that an executive committee decision under Beck had agreed on this timetable.

Then, they spread the news of Franz Müntefering's return to an "important leadership post." This also was directed against Beck, who had pushed through some slight changes in the government's welfare reforms last year against Müntefering's opposition. And finally, they humiliated Beck completely by releasing the news of Steinmeier's candidacy two days earlier than had been agreed, presenting it as their own decision.

In a personal statement about his resignation, Beck spoke about the plots and deliberate misinformation he had faced.

The party that 35 years ago had placed the slogan "Dare for more democracy!" on its banner today shows utter disdain for even the most elementary membership rights and questions of party democracy. "How many undemocratic

actions will the party accept?" the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* asked. But that is not an open question. The members that remain in the party today will accept everything.

Dictatorship of the Schröder supporters

Not for the first time, the right-wing leadership has pushed through its political line over the heads of the membership. This has been the rule since the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder. Ten years ago, Schröder said there would be no policies aimed against big business as long as he was leader; then, in alliance with the Green Party, pushing through drastic social cuts.

When the catastrophic effects of the welfare and labour reforms became visible, with voters and members abandoning the SPD in droves, and resistance to these antisocial policies taking on increasingly aggressive forms, Schröder and Müntefering organised premature federal elections, confronting their members and voters with an ultimatum: Either you accept Schröder's policies or a Christian Democrat-led government would enact even harsher attacks. Already at that time, the actions of Schröder, Müntefering and Steinmeier had the character of a political putsch.

Schröder went on to enjoy lucrative positions in business, the others taking on important ministerial positions in the grand coalition, where they continued the welfare and labour reform policies.

The internal party critics had and have nothing to counterpose to Schröder's policies, but warn that the party faces complete ruin in view of the loss of members and demand some slight adaptations in policy, even if this is only symbolic.

Kurt Beck tried to hold the different positions together and prevent the break-up of the party. By partially tolerating an approach to the Left Party, as in Hesse, he wanted to halt the slump in membership.

In principle, the SPD right wing does not fear closer collaboration with the Left Party. After all, for seven years, the SPD has worked closely with the Left Party in the Berlin Senate (city legislature), together carrying out a programme of social cuts more comprehensive than under most other state governments.

Above all, it is the question of how the social attacks are to be carried through against the general population that stands behind the rejection of the Left Party. In this matter, the SPD right wing is demanding confrontation and no compromises.

The putsch against Beck heralds a new stage in the decline of the SPD. The contempt for democratic customs demonstrated in Steinmeier's coup last weekend will soon be expressed in more aggressive and ruthless actions against working people.

The putsch-like behaviour of the SPD right wing signals to the ruling circles and employers associations that the SPD is ready to carry out the attacks on social conditions and to defend the bourgeois order with the same ruthlessness.

The Müntefering-Steinmeier constellation embodies a tradition in German social democracy that was always prepared to subordinate party interests to those of the state and, if necessary, sacrifice the party in the process.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier is a typical political apparatchik. Just a few years ago, he was largely unknown. Some 15 years ago, when Gerhard Schröder was state premier of Lower Saxony, he appointed Steinmeier to head up his office. Later, he appointed him a state secretary and then placed him in charge of the Lower Saxony state chancellery. At the end of the 1990s, when Schröder was elected federal chancellor, Steinmeier went with him to Berlin, becoming chancellery chief under the SPD-Green Party government. Afterwards, he was appointed foreign minister and vice-chancellor in the grand coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and SPD. During his rise to the top of the party and government, Steinmeier has not once put himself forward for election by the people.

Franz Müntefering embodies the close links between the SPD and the trade union bureaucracy. His authoritarian style and loyalty to the state are closely connected with the rightward turn of the unions.

There is yet another aspect that must be considered in evaluating the putsch carried out by the SPD right wing, although it receives scarce mention in the media: the intensification of the international situation in light of the crisis in Georgia.

Regardless of the efforts of the media and politicians to play down the events in Georgia and the reactions that followed, they mark a world political turning point. Behind Georgia stands the US government, which has been working since the dissolution of the Soviet Union to put Russia under pressure and encircle it militarily. The US regards the Caucasus and the Caspian region as part of its own sphere of influence and is seeking to establish control over the energy resources located there. Russia opposes these ambitions, and so the conflict between the two largest nuclear powers is intensified.

Europe, and above all Germany, is pursuing its own energy policy and geo-strategic interests in the region, doing this both in competition and in cooperation with the US government while also seeking to preserve relations with Russia.

In view of the mounting conflicts between the great powers, and the instability associated with this, the right-wing SPD leaders are trying to bring Germany's oldest party—and one that has played an important role in preserving order in all earlier crises—under their control in order to suppress political resistance.

The fears that beset the grand coalition were revealed in a recent study undertaken on behalf of the chancellor regarding the effects of an energy crisis on Germany's internal stability. The study also considered what social and political conflicts would be likely as a result.

The study by the Federal Academy for Security Policy also considered the dangers "from within"—as described in press reports—pointing out that "an unparalleled state crisis" would confront "violent riots and demonstrations." The right-wing putsch in the leadership of the SPD is part of the preparations to confront such future social and political upheavals.



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