

German Social Democrats meet in the shadow of the financial crisis

Ulrich Rippert
24 October 2008

The special congress of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) last weekend, which elected Franz Müntefering as party chairman and Frank-Walter Steinmeier as the party's candidate for the chancellorship, took place in the shadow of the ever-growing international financial crisis.

A few hours before the start of the special party congress, deputies in the Bundestag (German parliament) had agreed to a €500 billion (US\$644 billion) package for German banks in a fast track procedure. Both the SPD and the Christian Democratic Union had insisted on such a special procedure, which violates all the stipulations and time tables laid down in the German constitution for the passage of legislation and prevents any serious discussion in parliament, parliamentary factions and committees—not to speak of any wider social debate.

The SPD played a key role in preparing and pushing through the multibillion-euro program directed entirely to satisfying the needs of the banks. During the past few weeks Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) has been in continuous contact with the chairman of Deutsche Bank, Josef Ackerman, and other representatives of the financial elite. Steinbrück has occasionally expressed his dissatisfaction with the high-handedness with which Ackerman and his fellow bankers laid down the law, but when it came down to it the finance minister capitulated to all of the bankers' demands.

At its congress the SPD patted itself on the back as the "saviour in a time of need" and made clear to the ruling elite that it had no scruples about undertaking the next step in the "bank rescue," i.e., imposing drastic welfare and social cuts on the working population.

This is the significance of the remarks by Müntefering, who demanded from the party "more self-assurance, also against pressure from outside." He expressly supported the antisocial Agenda 2010 policy introduced by the SPD and declared to delegates: "I have a good conscience about what we did at that time." Müntefering continued: "If one recognizes that a policy is correct but not popular, one cannot simply run away, one must fight it out."

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), Steinmeier also "praised and expressed his appreciation for the policies introduced by the former SPD-Green government, without once

mentioning the term Agenda 2010." Steinmeier told the congress: "We were the ones who plugged the holes in the leaky German ship and made it sail again."

The SZ asked: "What was the response of the party [at the special congress], which only six weeks ago had vigorously debated over the sense and purpose of the Agenda?," and then answered its own question: "It applauded. Vigorously." Steinmeier received a standing ovation lasting several minutes.

The party congress held in Berlin marks a further stage in the lurch to the right of the SPD.

As a direct consequence of the draconian Agenda 2010 policies, the SPD has lost millions of voters and several hundred thousand members in recent years. Following the departure of all those who had hoped it might be possible to pressure the party to take another, less antisocial course, Müntefering and Steinmeier are now undertaking to reorganize this bureaucratic apparatus to impose additional social cuts and further attacks on democratic rights.

This was the aim of the congress as a whole. Terms like "unity," "unanimity" and "harmony" dominated the speeches. The new "unity" was also demonstrated by the presence at the congress of the party's old guard. Sitting prominently at the front of the congress were former party chairman Hans-Jochen Vogel and former chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Even the nearly ninety-year-old former chancellor Helmut Schmidt had been wheeled out of retirement to shake the hand of the newly appointed chancellor-candidate, Steinmeier.

The congress delegates nominated Steinmeier by a 95 percent majority, well aware that he played an important role in implementing Agenda 2010. Müntefering received just 85 percent of the delegates' votes—a relatively low poll for the post of SPD chairman. In particular, delegates from the state of Rhineland-Palatinate were displeased with the brusque manner in which Müntefering ejected his predecessor Kurt Beck from office two months ago. The new chairman, however, had no problem with his congress result. Müntefering, who had resigned as party chair three years ago following differences with the party as a whole, made clear he would have taken the post even with a majority of 50.1 percent.

Müntefering went to considerable lengths to praise Steinmeier and put him in the spotlight. Up until quite recently

Frank-Walter Steinmeier was largely unknown to the party as a whole. Fifteen years ago he was groomed by the prime minister of Lower Saxony at that time, Gerhard Schröder, and appointed the latter's office director. At a later point he headed Schröder's state chancellery. At the end of the 1990s, Steinmeier accompanied Schröder to Berlin and became head of the chancellery in the SPD-Green coalition government. Following the formation of the Social Democratic-Christian Democratic grand coalition, Steinmeier was appointed foreign minister and eventually vice-chancellor.

The tradition of Noske

Both Müntefering and Steinmeier represent a political tradition characterised by complete subordination to the state. They regard the SPD as an instrument for the maintenance of the bourgeois order and not at all a democratic means of articulating the opinions and interests of its membership. The first priority of the party machinery, in their eyes, is to control and suppress if necessary any independent movement of the working population.

Time and again in the course of its history, the SPD has thrown up reactionary figures who, under conditions of social unrest, were quite prepared to employ dictatorial methods and extreme brutality against the population.

During the upheavals in Germany that followed the end of the First World War, the SPD Defence Minister, Gustav Noske, dispatched special units of the army against rebellious workers and bloodily suppressed emerging workers' and soldiers' councils. In his description of the discussion over how to proceed against the revolutionary elements and whether the army was to be used, Noske quoted his own words at the time: "Someone must be the bloodhound—I won't shrink from the responsibility."

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

It is notable that the Social Democrats have recently paid tribute to Noske. The SPD Bundestag deputy Johannes Kahrs, who represents the party on the parliamentary defence committee, publicly declared he includes Gustav Noske among his political role models.

In 1929, 10 years after Noske's suppression of the Spartakus uprising, Berlin's Social Democratic chief of police, Karl Friedrich Zörgiebel, banned traditional May Day demonstrations. When workers from the Berlin districts of Wedding and Neukölln nevertheless gathered to demonstrate, Zörgiebel ordered his troops to shoot down protesters. His action cost the lives of 32 people.

A year later the SPD supported the centre politician Heinrich Brüning who, as chancellor, introduced emergency decrees

aimed at shifting the burden of the world economic crisis onto the backs of the working population. Brüning's attacks on democratic rights and his suppression of the population smoothed the path for the fascists to take power. Three years later Hitler was appointed chancellor.

The modern SPD has not had the opportunity or need to act in the manner of Noske and Zörgiebel, but its unconditional support for the capitalist profit system has its own iron logic.

The role of the "left"

The "lefts" inside the SPD played a rotten role at the recent congress. Their spokesperson Andrea Nahles opened the party congress with a speech in which she praised the government's billion-euro gift to the banks. According to Nahles: "The SPD has never shrunk from its responsibility even in a time of crisis." The bank rescue package agreed upon by the government last week clearly bears the hallmark of the Social Democrats. Nahles stressed the package was necessary "to prevent a worldwide financial crisis from turning into a world economic crisis."

In the recent past the SPD lefts repeatedly expressed criticisms of Müntefering and Steinmeier. At the Berlin congress the applause from the left wing of the party was unmistakably enthusiastic. SPD regional chairman Ralf Stegner praised the long-winded, monotonous 90-minute address by Steinmeier as a "chancellor's speech," which had inspired the delegates, while former Young Socialist leader Björn Böhning declared his pleasure that Steinmeier had given a "left-wing speech."

Nobody in the party is prepared to challenge the right-wing course of Schröder, Müntefering and Steinmeier. As the financial crisis intensifies, the SPD apparatus is closing ranks to prepare its response to major class struggles.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact