

German federal election

SPD leader presents “Germany Plan”

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On August 3, the chancellor candidate of the Social Democratic Party, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, publicly presented his party's program for the parliamentary election due to take place September 27. The so-called “Germany Plan” fulsomely promises to create 4 million jobs, full employment in 10 years and income equality.

These fundamental social needs, urgently sought by millions of workers and unemployed, are incompatible, however, with the capitalist system. The creation of millions of new jobs is entirely possible and by no means utopian, but socialist measures are required in order to achieve them. As long as society is dominated by a financial elite and a small layer of business interests, social inequality will inevitably increase. Only a mass movement from below can break the grip on power of the finance aristocracy and establish democratic relations in economic life. At the same time the world's problems can only be resolved on the basis of international socialist policies.

The SPD and its leading candidate and German Vice Chancellor Steinmeier flatly reject such a perspective. The “Germany Plan” reads like the final project paper of a management seminar. It is solely concerned with strengthening the position of German concerns and employers in the struggle for international markets and raw materials.

It should be noted that while the word “Germany” crops up in Steinmeier's paper on no less than 149 occasions, “social inequality” is mentioned just twice. Unceasingly the document refers to the need that Germany “recognise and control leading markets of the future”, the German software branch must be helped to achieve “the same level as the US”, and Germany made the “leading market for electric powered cars.” Germany must also assume the “leading place” in the field of renewable energy, according to the paper.

Phrases such as, “We want to ensure that in the end, Germany is out in front”, “At this Germany is tops”, “The efficiency revolution in the world must be ‘Made in Germany’” and “Export world champion Germany” reoccur like a red thread through the nearly 70 pages of the document.

One is forced to ask what is going to happen to the rest of the world when Germany is world champion in every field. The reality is that the “Germany Plan” is a program for trade and economic war. Significantly, Steinmeier has nothing to say on this point. He does not deal with such issues as foreign or military policy. The European Union is only mentioned when it is discussed how Germany will impose its interests on Europe.

The “Germany Plan” is directed at the executive committees of big companies, the middle class and the trade union bureaucracy, which the plan promises to incorporate in a further extension of the German system of social partnership. “Companies in which the workforce and company management pull together emerge better from the crisis,” the

paper states. “We want to bring business, trade unions and the banks together at the same table in order to ensure Germany's strategic success factors over and beyond the crisis”.

The Steinmeier paper also strongly supports plans for so-called “financial participation of employees” based on workers donating a part of their wages to their ailing companies. This is precisely “tailored to ensure enduring company management and financing, and promotes social partnership in enterprises and the national economy”.

On the other hand, Steinmeier does not even attempt to make an appeal to the working class. Steinmeier played a leading role in the seven years of an SPD-Green Party government, and is vice-chancellor and foreign minister in the current SPD-conservative coalition government. He bears direct responsibility for such policies as the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV laws, as well as measures such as the raising of the pension age to 67 and tax gifts for the rich. It now apparent that, based on its record, the SPD has abandoned any hope of winning any broad support from the working population.

The introduction to the election program states bluntly, “We do not want a state based on equal distribution and patronization...we know that prosperity is based on individual and entrepreneurial freedom”.

Even such vital social fields as the health service are treated in the SPD program purely from their economic side as the “health economy”. According to the “Germany Plan”, the health economy is “a dynamic economic industry with high levels of innovation and great economic significance for Germany”. “The health location Germany” has to be “marketed internationally”.

The same criteria apply to culture, which Steinmeier calls the “creative industry”. The task is to strengthen the competitiveness of Germany's creative industry and develop a national policy for the future”, the paper states.

Following a series of devastating defeats for the SPD at the hands of voters in a series of federal, state and European elections, Steinmeier's basic message is “business as usual”. The result is shown in opinion polls—the most recent poll awards the SPD just 20 percent of voters' support. During the previous government headed by Gerhard Schröder (SPD), Steinmeier headed the German Chancellery and developed the Agenda 2010, which led to the loss of any residual support for the SPD within the working class, and the party lost hundreds of thousands of members during this period.

Only in the sphere of education does the “Germany Plan” promise to do away with fees, guaranteeing “exemption from charges from the nursery up to university” and proclaiming “access to education is a basic human right”. The plan envisages that 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product be invested in education and research by 2015.

No confidence should be placed in such hollow promises for a number of reasons. Firstly, just a few months ago the SPD together with its conservative coalition partners agreed a “debt brake” to be written into the constitution, which forces all future governments, both federal and state, to save billions. Every election campaign promise made will inevitably fall victim to this debt brake. Secondly, educational matters are, according to the recent reform of the federal system agreed by the government, entirely in the hands of state governments. Any future federal government will have no control over this field of policy.

The document makes clear that Steinmeier is eager to expand the country’s low-wage sector, which first took off under the SPD-Green Party coalition and has since then assumed massive dimensions. The already miserable conditions prevailing in patient care are to be expanded by increased “self-help and voluntary commitment in care and support”.

The Steinmeier paper regards the often appalling conditions in the “creative industry” where “jobs are often limited or project-related and rarely take the form of firm contracts involving fixed wage levels and participation” as both “incentive and risk...many artists and creative figures regard this as a chance for self-determination and advancement”. The measures that he then suggests to ensure the security of those working in the field of culture are completely insufficient.

The “Germany Plan” also calls for a broad minimum wage—with numerous reservations—but restricted to the sum of 7.50 euro, far less than in neighbouring countries.

Steinmeier also gives consideration to a historic problem for German capitalism—access to raw materials and energy. Precisely such issues have played a leading role in Steinmeier’s activities as foreign minister. One only has to recall the list of worldwide deployments by the German army, in particular in Afghanistan. Not coincidentally, Germany has also been a world leader in armament production for some time. However, open promotion of this aspect of the Germany economy is too delicate an issue for Steinmeier, who prefers to keep quiet.

Steinmeier approaches the same issue tangentially through the use of the label “energy and environmentally friendly”. In fact, what he means is: “Whoever seeks to be more competitive, must concentrate in future on energy and raw material efficiency. This world revolution in efficiency must be ‘Made in Germany’”. As was the case formerly with the Greens, Steinmeier sees enormous business opportunities for Germany based on the “Green economy.”

In light of the events of past months, Steinmeier cannot avoid mentioning the international financial crisis. But instead of examining its causes, he reduces it to a purely ideological problem. “Ideology as cause of the crisis” is the heading of the appropriate chapter, which declares that “the doctrine of shareholder value” has failed.

Steinmeier’s proposals for a solution are correspondingly absurd and chauvinistic. The document declares that “the fair and enduring forms of management in Germany” should be adopted “worldwide as a model”. “German commercial law, which bases itself on the moral concept of the ‘respectable merchant’ should be at the centre of a business renaissance—together with the special German form of social partnership between management and trade unions”.

Another passage reads, “These excesses and their consequences must above all be a lesson for those bearing responsibility. No economy can rely merely on making easy money and lose its basic orientation. Greed is a part of human nature, but we can rein it in. To

this end we must reorganise the global financial structure”.

These hollow clichés are aimed at covering up the fact that the SPD is prostrate before the financial oligarchs. It has opened the way for speculators by deregulation of markets and tax reductions and since the start of the crisis has done everything to protect the interests of the banks. Not a single speculator has been held to account. Instead, billions of taxpayers’ money has been handed over to the banks.

On this issue the document has nothing to say. Instead it acknowledges sheepishly, “It is already taking place again—as if nothing had happened. Billions in profits for the banks, millions paid out in salaries to the employees of state controlled banks and hedge funds, which have dusted down and revived their old business models.... Should the SPD be elected into government on September 27”, the document continues ingenuously, “then you can be sure we will do something about this.”

The trade unions and some top managers have welcomed Steinmeier’s plan. Emanuele Gatti, board member of the medical technology manufacturer Fresenius Medical Care, declared, “I see big growth potential in the health sector”. And Leo Apotheker, chief executive of the software giant SAP, stated, “We have a big catching up job to do compared to US and India”.

Bankers are also appreciative of the “Germany Plan”. Dr. Dirk Notheis, chairman of the executive committee of Morgan Stanley Bank, said, “We need more than ever a clash of ideas about the correct future strategy. But the Steinmeier plan provides a solid platform. It is a holistic concept and altogether a respectable analysis”.

Steinmeier’s plan is the SPD’s latest attempt to demonstrate to the financial and business elite that his party will unwaveringly represent their interests should they be part of a future German government.



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