

# Germany: Whither the SPD?

## The working class and the decline of social democracy

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3 October 2009

The decline of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) vote to 23 percent in the bundestag (federal parliament) election last Sunday has provoked reaction and debate. Many comments preserve the hope that in opposition, the SPD can regenerate and regain strength.

Left Party leader Gregor Gysi has called on the SPD to use its role in opposition to “re-social democratise” itself. His party colleague, Oskar Lafontaine, has proposed a social-democratic renewal of the SPD.

What is remarkable about this discussion is its use of abstract terms and clichés. It proceeds from the assumption that because of its whole history, the SPD represents the interests of the working class. The party, the line goes, has regrettably abandoned the path of social-democratic reform, but it can and will find its way back.

Nobody dares to look reality in the face and answer the question: What is the SPD? This is because a conscientious investigation of the party’s programme, its policies and its social orientation make clear that the SPD is a rightwing, bourgeois party. It has pushed through social attacks in the past 11 years in government and has diminished democratic rights like no conservative-led government before it. It still boasts today that, in alliance with the Greens, it realized the “social reforms”—i.e., welfare cuts—that were demanded by the employers’ associations and that the conservative Kohl government was not able to implement.

The SPD-Green coalition introduced cheap wages on a grand scale with the Hartz laws and Agenda 2010 “reforms.” These reforms undermined union-agreed wages and began a spiral of wage cuts, producing mass poverty and misery. On the other hand, they sharply lowered taxes for big business and the wealthy, thereby accelerating the redistribution of social wealth from the bottom to the top. In the seven years of the Schröder government, the highest tax rate sank from 53 to 42 percent.

Social Democratic finance ministers pointed to the supposedly empty coffers to justify one austerity measure after another. Nevertheless, they quickly handed over €480 billion to the banks to secure their risky and, in part, criminal

speculative transactions. Not a single bank manager has been held to account for the losses and social devastation that they caused. In SPD headquarters at Willy Brandt House, the party boasts of its good relations with the financial aristocracy.

At the same time, the SPD, in alliance with the Greens and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), has drastically limited civil rights and despatched the German Armed Forces on international combat missions. For eight years, it has supported the war in Afghanistan, seeking to mask its imperialist character with humanitarian clichés. Former Social Democratic Defence Minister Peter Struck said only recently in parliament that he cannot bear the opposition of the population to this war any longer.

Do the rightwing politics of the SPD mean that no difference exists between it and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and that last Sunday’s election victory of the CDU/CSU and FDP should even be welcomed? Not at all.

The SPD and FDP are, just like the CDU and CSU, rightwing bourgeois parties, but they have a different history and fulfil different functions. The SPD sought and seeks to implement the policy of welfare cuts in such a way that it can keep the resistance of the working class under control. It relies thereby on the trade unions, whose industrial apparatus strangles every serious opposition from below. In this regard, it is an important instrument for protecting bourgeois rule in times of crisis.

The substantially smaller FDP relies on a section of the better off middle class. It is no accident that for some years it has termed itself the “high earners’ party.” Developed after the Second World War from the remnants of the National Liberal Party and the German People’s Party, it always had a strong nationalist wing. In the era of Willy Brandt, the social-liberal forces in the FDP predominated. But under party leader Guido Westerwelle and General Secretary Dirk Niebel, the party has developed a more pro-big business profile and has become the mouthpiece of the most egotistic and arrogant sections of the better-off middle class.

On Sunday, Westerwelle's FDP, in alliance with the big business wing of the CDU/CSU, clearly gained in influence, and with their demands for deregulation, privatisation and tax cuts is preparing a government that will dramatically intensify the assault on the welfare state.

The political responsibility for this swing to the right lies entirely with the SPD. The next government will be one of social confrontation. It is the result of years of attacks, for which the social democrats are responsible. The reactionary politics of the SPD have smoothed the way for the most rightwing political forces.

The SPD knew this and based its political calculations upon it. In a cynical election campaign, it stressed again and again that there would be no change in the "Agenda 2010 policies." However, the SPD hoped this would suffice for a continuation of its grand coalition with the CDU, in order to implement welfare cuts in the usual way, through the collaboration of the two largest parties, supported by the trade unions.

On election night, the rightward course of the SPD produced a different result. Millions of voters refused to cast their ballot for the SPD. In particular, the party suffered substantial losses in traditional social democratic strongholds. On the other hand, sections of the better-off middle class swung into motion. Worried by the economic crisis, they fear for their privileged social position. They supported the FDP, hoping to shift the burden of the crisis onto the lower social layers.

The employers' associations used this change in mood towards a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition in order to install a government that will carry the social attacks much further than the previous grand coalition. They regard the economic crisis as a chance to put an end to what is left of the welfare state and to remove the term "social" once and for all from the free-market economy.

The change of government begins a new stage in social developments. Big class battles now stand on the agenda. Like the FDP, the big business wing of the CDU/CSU is making little secret of the fact that the new government will follow the dictates of the economic elite.

Many political and economic observers are perturbed and warn of big social shocks to come. Some cling to Merkel's statement on election night that she wants to be "chancellor of all Germans." The idea that Angela Merkel of all people would preserve social cohesion and equilibrium is grotesque. The chancellor already proved her agility in 2003, when she made a pact with the free market liberals around Friedrich Merz at the Leipzig party congress and called for the introduction of a flat rate health insurance contribution.

## A political balance sheet

Political responsibility for the coming government of social confrontation rests entirely with the SPD, which opened the way for rightwing political forces with its attacks on welfare and social gains. The fact that many workers now refuse to vote for the SPD is to be welcomed. But they must now take the next step: the building of a new party that is opposed to the logic of capitalism and that mobilizes the working class internationally in a struggle to defend its rights and gains. This requires an international, socialist programme.

This is the significance of participation in the elections of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Social Equality Party). As the German section of the Fourth International, the PSG stands in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism. It rests on the political lessons of past class battles and fights for the political independence of the working class.

The break with the SPD that has begun must be continued and deepened. In opposition, the SPD will cling to its anti-social policies. It sees as its principal task suppressing every social movement against the new government. The Left Party and the various political groups that have joined with it will support the SPD in this. That is the real meaning of their claim that the SPD will renew itself in opposition.

It has already become clear that there will be no such renewal. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the architect of Agenda 2010 and a past candidate for chancellor, has taken over the leadership of the SPD bundestag faction in order to prevent any move away from the policies of Agenda 2010. After years cooperating with Merkel as her vice-chancellor, he has assured the new government that the SPD will "work as a responsible opposition."

The new head of the SPD will be Sigmar Gabriel. He is the leader of the so-called "networkers" in the SPD, an alliance of young careerists and social climbers, who express their opportunism in the formula: "Not left, not right, but forwards!" Their political programme reads: Everything that promotes one's own party career is good.

The election results of last Sunday have not only set the scene for violent class battles, but also herald an important process of political clarification.



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