

# German Social Democrats invoke failed and abandoned reformist program

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The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) congress, which ended on Sunday, had something of an unreal atmosphere. The party, which suffered its worst ever result in September's national parliamentary elections, pledged to "return to the program of social democracy," ignoring the fact that this reformist program had long ago collapsed.

The three day conference, attended by some 500 delegates, revealed a party that is incapable of looking political reality in the eye. The SPD gathering recalled the last days of Stalinist East Germany's ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED).

On October 7, 1989, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany), SED leader and head of state Erich Honecker proclaimed his belief in the glorious future of the GDR and the SED with the words: "The course of socialist society can be stopped by neither ox nor donkey." When he uttered these words the GDR and SED were only weeks away from dissolution.

The utterances of both the old and the new SPD party leadership at the congress in Dresden were less flowery, but no less delusional. The new party chief, Sigmar Gabriel, gave a one-and-a-half-hour speech that was greeted with standing ovations lasting several minutes. His core message could be summed up as: "Not everything we did was bad."

"Don't be faint-hearted," Gabriel exhorted the delegates. "There was a tremendous amount in our time in office about which we can still be proud." The inner strength of renewal arises only from pride over "what we achieved and did well."

But there was not a trace of renewal at the party congress. The SPD holds firmly to its previous policy of welfare and labour counter-reforms embodied in its Agenda 2010.

There was no call to rescind the welfare cuts implemented under the Hartz laws, nor to reverse the raising of the retirement age for pensioners to 67. At most, these measures might in the future be "reexamined."

As Gabriel said, "Dear comrades, the SPD must and will not deny its time in government. Much from the eleven years remains."

The new SPD leader praised the outgoing party leaders, who drew up, defended and implemented the anti-social Agenda 2010 policies, employing ruthless bureaucratic measures to defeat popular resistance. "I was very pleased that the party congress applauded Franz Müntefering," Gabriel said.

According to *Die Welt*, Gabriel and Müntefering had reached an agreement before the congress by which the old party leadership pledged to act "reasonably and with reserve," and in return the new leadership promised not to abandon Agenda 2010.

While many of the delegates demanded a return to "social democratic values," the congress resolutions made clear that the SPD intends to cling to the policies that have led to its catastrophic defeat at the polls and a substantial decline in membership.

In reality, the party's right-wing policies are not a turn away from social democratic traditions, but rather their implementation under conditions of capitalist crisis. The inability of the SPD to renew itself politically has deep objective and historical roots.

The Dresden meeting ended with a speech by Erhard Eppler, the 82-year-old former chairman of the SPD's Commission on Fundamental Values, regarding the significance of the Godesberg party conference fifty years ago. As a young man, Eppler had participated in this SPD conference, at which the party renounced its links to the working class and constituted itself as a "people's party."

Three years earlier, the banning of the German

Communist Party (KPD) had strengthened the influence of the SPD, which played an important role in the debate over rearmament and the formation of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). In Godesberg, it completed its turn to the right and prepared to take on governmental responsibility.

The SPD placed at the centre of the Godesberg programme the defence of the “free market” economy and its social arrangements. The capitalist profit system had to be maintained, while being linked with a program of social reforms, the *credo ran*. At that time, under conditions of the economic boom of the post-war period, it was possible to improve workers' living conditions without placing capitalism in question. Wages and social spending rose.

Under these conditions, the influence of the SPD grew, and in the autumn of 1972 SPD leader Willy Brandt achieved the best-ever election result in over one hundred years of party history.

But the salad days of social reformism did not last long. Already by the mid-1970s the situation was changing. A world-wide recession led to a sharp rise in energy prices—the so-called oil crisis—which had a devastating effect on German exports and industry. Leading business circles demanded a political change. Willy Brandt was replaced as chancellor and his SPD successor, Helmut Schmidt, began the systematic dismantling of social gains.

Since then, the clock of social reformism has run backwards. The globalization of production and the associated dominance of the international financial aristocracy have completely undermined the policy of social reformism. The financial elite and the employers' associations insist on ever-greater welfare cuts.

The maintenance of capitalism can no longer be reconciled with the social needs of the vast majority of working people. The defence of wages, jobs and past social gains requires a socialist perspective and a political struggle against the capitalist profit system.

The SPD utterly rejects such a perspective and reacts by continually shifting to the right. The SPD-Green Party government (1998-2005) under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder implemented more cuts in social spending than all the Christian Democratic-led governments before it. And in the grand coalition government of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats that followed in 2005, it was the SPD ministers who were responsible for social attacks on the working class.

For the SPD, the defence of bourgeois order and capitalist property has the highest priority. Even in the 1970s, the party's social reforms were always aimed at

stabilizing capitalism, with the welfare state serving to regulate and moderate class conflict.

But under conditions of international economic crisis, the welfare state and capitalism can no longer be reconciled. The SPD has sacrificed the welfare state on the altar of the profit system and transformed itself into a right-wing bourgeois party.

The rightward turn and disintegration of social democratic parties is a European and worldwide political phenomenon. The British Labour Party is in the advanced stages of collapse. It is no different in France, where Sarkozy has been able to remain in power thanks in large measure to the role of the Socialist Party, to say nothing of Italy, where Berlusconi's right-wing regime is the product of the bankruptcy of the so-called “left.”

In Germany, the Dresden party congress heralds a new stage in the decay of the SPD. Regardless of the oft-repeated professions of many delegates in support of a “renewal in opposition,” the defence of its previous government policy means that the SPD will support the policies of the Christian Democratic-Free Democratic Party federal coalition government. Voters and members will continue to abandon the SPD in droves.

As occurred twenty years ago in the case of the SED, this political exodus may very well proceed more swiftly than some might imagine. This time the working class must intervene actively and assert its own interests by building a new party on the basis of an international socialist program. This is the socialist alternative for which the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit) fights.

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