

German leftist think tank: The SPD's right-wing agenda in a new garb

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24 February 2010

On January 31, representatives of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens founded an organisation to be known as the “Institute for Solidarity in Modern Times” (Institut Solidarische Moderne). It describes itself as a “think tank” with the goal of developing an alternative to neoliberalism and ensuring “that the majority of the population, seeking such an alternative, once again achieves the majority of votes in democratic elections.”

Leading figures in the new association include Andrea Ypsilanti and Hermann Scheer, two long-standing SPD politicians from the left wing of the party. Until January last year, Ypsilanti was the SPD's regional chairperson in the federal state of Hesse and member of the party's national committee. She withdrew from both posts after opposition from four SPD members stymied her attempt to build an SPD-Green minority government supported by the Left Party. Scheer, a member of the SPD since 1965 and the federal parliament since 1980, served on the SPD national committee from 1993 to 2009.

The Left Party is represented in the founding committee of the new organisation by the party's deputy leader, Katja Kipping, as well as its parliamentary fraction's spokesman for legal matters, Wolfgang Neskovic. Among the roughly 150 founder members of the new organisation are two more high-profile members of the Left Party, Axel Troost and Paul Schäfer. Troost, a co-founder of the former west German-based Election Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG), belongs to the Left party's national committee and is finance spokesman for its federal parliamentary fraction. Schäfer, a former member of the German Communist Party (DKP), was also on the party's national committee at an earlier time. He is currently spokesman for defence and disarmament in the parliamentary fraction, as well as its representative in the parliament's defence committee.

The Greens are represented in the new organisation by Sven Giegold, the former co-founder of Attac (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) and current Green deputy in the European Parliament, as well as Sven-Christian Kindler, a federal member of parliament. In addition, about two dozen other federal and state representatives of the Greens are among the founding members

named on the organisation's web site. Executive board members of the German trade union federation (DGB) and the IG Metall trade union, Annelie Buntenbach and Hans Jürgen Urban, have also secured themselves seats on the organisation's management committee.

In a seven-page founding declaration, the organisation confirmed its intention of enabling “the expectations of the majority of the population to be transformed into corresponding forms of majority political expression.” In other words, it sees its task as the promotion of a majority ballot for the SPD, Green and Left Party in future elections, and the creation of a basic program for such an undertaking.

The founding declaration further states: “By bringing together through word and deed that which socio-politically coheres, the movement will effect a visible bonding within the political landscape that activates shared interests among the most diverse protagonists and moulds them into potential social alternatives.”

However, a closer look at the founding declaration soon reveals that these “shared interests among the most diverse protagonists” will, first and foremost, be distinguished by a rejection of Marxism and the class struggle. Although social contradictions continue to mount, the new organisation rejects the struggle for social equality. The word “solidarity,” appearing in its name, relates to issues involving the lifestyle and individual self-realisation of the lower middle class.

It criticises “classical” left-wingers of “modern industrial times” for placing the “question of the distribution of material wealth” at the centre of their political activity. Because of their “focus on wage labour and their consequent ignorance of other equally socially significant activities, like child raising, political involvement, educational work and leisure,” they have reached the limits of their political relevance, the document contends.

The declaration goes on to claim that a “momentous mistake of the political left” also lies in “perceiving capitalism as a system of exploitation of the vast majority of people by a privileged minority, while refraining from placing other power structures—for example, the patriarchal system of female repression—at the centre of its criticism.”

On the other hand, a “new alternative left” is said to have developed in Western “postmodern times” on the basis of the

widespread material prosperity of post-war society—an alternative force “for whom core interests are concerned with immaterial needs and new social issues: the potential for individual development and right of self-determination, cultural diversity and participation in the democratic process, sexual equality and protection of the natural environment.”

The declaration concedes that “despite the increase in non-manual work and individual self-realisation, the question of the distribution of material wealth has certainly not yet been ‘settled,’ nor has it become obsolete.” Nevertheless, it explicitly emphasises the political significance of issues relating to lifestyle and the environment: “By ‘solidarity in modern times’ we mean the urgently required reconciliation between the emancipatory features of modern industry and the postmodern era, on the one hand, and their further development towards a socio-environmental answer to the questions of our times, on the other.”

This is an extremely reactionary right-wing program. After years of attacks on the working and living conditions of the working class, with the creation of a vast low-pay sector and the impoverishment of millions of people through the miserly Hartz IV unemployment support, the “Institute for Solidarity in Modern Times” declares that one should not attach too much importance to the question of wage labour. Despite having to suffer conditions arising from the greatest economic crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, attention should instead be directed towards immaterial needs and individual self-development.

It is no coincidence that numerous trade union functionaries have joined the new organisation. Berhold Huber, the IG Metall leader, gave an address last Wednesday that was completely in line with its objectives. In a speech last week in the city of Essen, Huber complained about the stress of working life: “Work is intruding on private life, really eating it up,” and this eventually makes a person ill, bodily and spiritually. On the evening of the same day, Huber signed on behalf of the 3.4 million workers in the metal and electrical industries a wage agreement that prescribed them considerably shorter working hours—with correspondingly lower wages.

Huber, who draws a monthly income of almost €20,000 from the trade union and has been feathering his own nest for years, can easily speak about immaterial needs. But with the trade unions having agreed to reductions in real wages for the last two decades, as well as having supported the Agenda 2010 program of Gerhard Schröder’s SPD-Green government, the new income cuts threaten the very survival of many workers.

The new organisation addresses itself to people like Huber and other well-to-do representatives of the upper middle class. They feel threatened by mounting social tensions and react hostilely to protests from below. Previously, representatives of this social layer gathered around the Greens, who have moved far to the right in view of the growing polarisation of society. Now Ypsilanti, Scheer, Kipping, Giegold and Co. are seeking

their support in order to check the decline of the SPD.

The founding of the “Institute for Solidarity in Modern Times” has not by chance coincided with Oskar Lafontaine’s withdrawal from the leadership of the Left party. Five years ago, Lafontaine took the initiative to establish the Left Party in order to collect disenchanted supporters of the rapidly disintegrating SPD, in which he had played a leading role for 40 years.

Lafontaine, an experienced bourgeois politician, understood the importance of the SPD in times of social crisis. For good reason, he was regarded as a favourite pupil of Willie Brandt, who had cleared the streets of rebellious youths in 1969. Lafontaine was himself elected prime minister of the state of Saarland in 1985, when steel workers and miners were protesting fiercely about the closure of their works. He then succeeded in shutting down the coal and steel industry, while avoiding any serious revolts.

The massive spurning of the SPD by voters and party members in reaction to Gerhard Schröder’s Agenda 2010 would have caused Lafontaine great anxiety. His aim was to use the Left Party to provide the SPD with a new coalition partner that would help it or an SPD/Green alliance back into government.

However, Lafontaine’s plan failed because the collapse of the SPD proceeded faster than the establishment of the Left Party. His plans to exploit coalitions with the SPD at the state level in order to pave the way for a governing coalition in the federal parliament broke down first in Hesse and then in Saarland and Thuringia. The Left Party adopted patently anti-working-class policies in Berlin and Brandenburg, where it participated in government. The sharpening of the economic crisis no longer allows any form of social compromise in politics. This is another thing Lafontaine failed to reckon with.

The occasional populist remarks he finds necessary to combat the declining credibility of the Left Party have also brought Lafontaine into conflict with those sections of the party already in coalition administrations in eastern German states and municipalities.

The “Institute for Solidarity in Modern Times” is making a new attempt to pave the way for an alliance between the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens—but on a far more right-wing political basis. Lafontaine tried to spread the illusion that the politics of social reform of the 1960s could somehow be revived. Now this new organisation is promoting so-called “immaterial needs” and individual self-development in order to develop arguments for the wide-scale cuts in social expenditure demanded by big business.



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