

German SPD conference approves election program

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The Social Democratic Party (SPD) conference in Augsburg has sent a clear message: the party agrees with the Merkel government in all essentials, and promises not to make the social attacks in Europe a focus of attention in its campaign for this year's general election. The party proposes to continue and intensify the policy of social devastation across Europe.

It was a nauseating spectacle; the right-wing program agreed by the SPD at this conference was cloaked with cheap populist phrases and embellished with worn-out quotations from Brecht. It is well-known that the party's Agenda 2010 from the middle of the last decade resulting in deep attacks on social spending and workers' social rights.

The SPD candidate for chancellor, Peer Steinbrück, whose poll ratings have sunk through the floor, received the most applause for his nearly 90-minute speech at the beginning of proceedings, when he declared he wanted to become Chancellor of Germany. Delegates gave him a standing ovation for several minutes, as if this might ensure his desire was fulfilled.

The speech contained some moderate social demands, such as the call for a minimum wage of €8.50 euros (\$11.07), the expansion of child day-care centres, and a limit to rent increases.

In his speech, party leader Sigmar Gabriel also tried to make similar social appeals, such as greater taxation of the rich.

The SPD has made comparable demands in every election campaign—only to do the exact opposite when in government, however.

More significant than these comments was the fact that neither Steinbrück nor Gabriel mentioned burning political and social issues in Europe and Germany. Conference speeches made no mention of the social attacks in Greece, the destruction of the Cypriot

banking sector, the government crisis in Italy—all largely dictated by the government in Berlin. Nor did the 150-page election manifesto mention the social crisis created in these countries.

The reason for this silence is the SPD's agreement with the austerity policies of the Merkel government. Since the coming to power of the Christian Democratic-Free Democratic Party coalition in 2009, the SPD has voted in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) for each and every bank bailout agreement with individual EU member states. It has supported not only the provision of hundreds of billions of euros in public funds to the banks and speculators, but also the rigid austerity programs resulting in massive social cuts and sheer misery for millions in Greece, Spain and Portugal.

The election manifesto adopted at the conference merely criticizes the government's "cuts and austerity policies" for containing too few "growth impulses."

The SPD manifesto criticizes Merkel from the right. It says she has implemented "anti-crisis measures too late and only half-heartedly, and thus unnecessarily made the costs of anti-crisis measures more expensive." The SPD wants to tighten up the EU's financial diktat by forming a "European economic government."

Chancellor candidate Steinbrück stands for these policies like no other. He was finance minister and Merkel's closest confidante in the SPD-CDU grand coalition from 2005 to 2009. He was the architect of the first bank bailout and the anchoring of the "debt brake" balanced-budget law in the constitution.

He ensured that every successive government that gives money to the banks recoup funds through budget cuts at the expense of the population.

Steinbrück's campaign team includes Michael Donnermeyer, Mathias Machnig and Heiko Geue, central figures in the SPD-Green Party government of

Gerhard Schröder, and who were instrumental in the development of the Agenda 2010 policies.

The party has anchored Agenda 2010 in its election manifesto. In its preamble, the policies of the former Schröder government are praised to the skies. It writes that Schröder made Germany the “most successful economy in Europe and the world.”

It continues, “The policy of reforms begun ten years ago by the SPD-led government also contributed to this. These reforms, Agenda 2010, had increased investment in research and innovation, accelerated the development of renewable energies and brought hundreds of thousands of people from the dead-end of welfare and integrated them for the first time in the active labour market policy.”

In fact, Agenda 2010 was the prelude to the social attacks now being imposed across Europe. Extensive legislative changes cut pensions and benefits, slashed the health care system, carried through privatizations, lowered taxes for the rich and for corporations, and created a huge low-wage sector. Nearly one in four workers in Germany work low-wage jobs. Despite having a full-time job, 350,000 people are dependent on the miserly welfare payments under the Hartz IV laws.

In March, Schröder demanded an Agenda 2020, to the applause of his party. Germany could only defend its lead over emerging economic powers such as Brazil and China “if we work hard on our competitiveness”, the former chancellor declared.

The SPD's election program confirms this course and that it is preparing to continue brutal social attacks in Germany and throughout Europe—either in coalition with the CDU conservatives or an alliance with the Greens.

The SPD's austerity policies are receiving trade union support. Speaking to the *Westdeutsche Zeitung* after the conference, German Trade Union Association leader Michael Sommer expressed delight that “Steinbrück can touch the comrades' heart and soul”.

He was also optimistic that the SPD, with the unions' help, can record an electoral success in September. The Left Party has also signalled its support for Steinbrück and Agenda 2020.

The SPD conference demonstrates that all the major parties are keeping burning social issues out of the election campaign. After the election—whatever

government emerges—they will then undertake the most brutal attacks against German and European workers.



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