

The SPD celebrates its 150th anniversary

Peter Schwarz
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Four months before the federal election, the Social Democratic Party is celebrating its 150th anniversary. The ceremony in Leipzig is completely directed towards the ruling elite, with the SPD eager to confirm that it will faithfully represent its interests at a time of crisis.

As party leader, Sigmar Gabriel proudly proclaimed on his website that the 1,600 invited guests include no less than ten heads of state, as well as many deputy and former heads of government, foreign ministers and European Commissioners. The German chancellor and chair of the Christian Democratic Union, Angela Merkel, will also attend the ceremony, together with the German President Joachim Gauck and the French President François Hollande.

Also in attendance are “around 30 party leaders and many senior party representatives, including the US Democrats, the South African ANC, the Indian Congress Party, the Chinese governing party and the Brazilian PT.”

Most of these parties have a long tradition of oppressing the working class. Obama's Democrats are responsible for criminal imperialist wars, targeted assassinations with drones, and the abolition of basic democratic rights. The South African ANC massacred dozens striking miners at Marikana last year. And the Chinese government uses dictatorial measures to enforce inhumane conditions of exploitation, while CCP members enrich themselves in princely fashion.

An appropriate audience for the birthday party of the SPD!

SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel recently gave his own interpretation of the SPD's history in preparation for the ceremony. It was no coincidence that he chose to give a long interview to Germany's leading business newspaper *Handelsblatt*.

The date of the anniversary celebration selected by the SPD is also significant. The founding of the General German Workers' Association (ADAV) in Leipzig by Ferdinand Lassalle on May 23, 1863 is not generally regarded as the date of origin of the SPD. Lassalle was a contentious figure who dominated his Association, met secretly with the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck and was killed in a senseless duel only a year after the founding of the ADAV. Much more serious political work was carried out by August

Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht.

Bebel and Liebknecht were in close contact with Marx and Engels and in 1869 founded the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP) in Eisenach. The year 1875 saw the merger of the SDAP and ADAV, and the Lassalleans rapidly lost influence. Bebel and Liebknecht led the organization and built it into a powerful mass party, educating hundreds of thousands of workers in Marxism. 1869 or 1875 are therefore much more likely to be cited as the founding date of the SPD than 1863.

Gabriel told the *Handelsblatt*, why he preferred Lassalle. From the latter one could learn that "attitude has nothing to do with social status. Lassalle was well off and more of a bon vivant. Nevertheless, he agitated on behalf of rachitic children in coal mines and the working class."

According to this view, the SPD was never a workers' party, but rather a party that took care of workers. It "was never a purely workers' party, but always a mixture of dedicated workers, enlightened and liberal middle class and left-wing intellectuals", Gabriel declares.

When *Handelsblatt* then notes that Bebel regarded the SPD as an “exclusively workers party,” Gabriel fiercely attacks the long-standing party chairman. The “materialists” around Bebel believed that “historical necessity demanded the collapse of capitalism. ... The most extreme form of materialism then ended up in Leninism, in which the path to socialism was to be accelerated by a dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The “idealists” around Bernstein, on the other hand, relied “on the ability of people to achieve democratic and social emancipation”.

In reality, Eduard Bernstein's concept of a peaceful reform of capitalism ended in the bloody trenches of World War I. The war proved that capitalism was destined to collapse on the basis of its own contradictions. It was Bernstein's attack on Marxism that prepared the betrayal of the SPD in 1914, which would then shape the entire century. The SPD supported a war that sacrificed the lives of millions of young men for imperialist interests.

The support for the First World War in 1914 marked the complete transition of the SPD into the camp of bourgeois

reaction. When the November Revolution of 1918 swept away the regime of Wilhelm II, it was the SPD which assembled demobilized soldiers into far right militias and repressed the workers' uprisings. The SPD then went on to construct a bourgeois state behind whose flimsy democratic façade the forces of reaction—the state, the army, big business and the Junkers—were able to reorganize and bring Hitler to power 15 years later.

Gabriel's profound cynicism is most clearly revealed when he refers to the vote against Hitler's Enabling Act by the Social Democratic parliamentary group in March 1933 as "probably the proudest moment in the history of the SPD".

In the years previously the SPD bore the main responsibility for hamstringing workers seeking to fight Hitler. It had effectively abolished democracy long before Hitler seized power by supporting the anti-working-class emergency decrees of Chancellor Brüning at the height of the economic crisis. In 1932 the SPD supported the election of Paul von Hindenburg as Reich President, who then appointed Hitler as chancellor. And when the right wing staged a coup and wrested power in Prussia in the same year, the party capitulated without a fight.

The fact that the SPD in 1933 was not prepared to support the Enabling Act, which amounted to signing its own death warrant, can hardly be counted as an event to be proud of.

After the Second World War, the SPD once again played a key role in consolidating the bourgeois state in which numerous former Nazis continued their careers and the very same industrialists who had financed Hitler and enriched themselves with forced labor were permitted to retain their property and power.

Asked by *Handelsblatt* about the concrete legacy of the three post war SPD chancellors Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schröder, Gabriel replied, "Assuming responsibility in difficult times."

He made clear that all three had defended the bourgeois order against pressure from the population and from inside the party itself: "That was the case in the first major economic crisis with Brandt, at the time of terrorism and a major oil crisis with Schmidt—and the Agenda 2010, and war against Iraq with Schröder. When in doubt the Social Democratic chancellors Brandt, Schmidt and Schröder put the country's interests above the good of the party."

Gabriel then bitterly complains that the current ruling coalition of the CDU and Free Democratic Party refer to themselves as a "bourgeois coalition", and seek to portray the SPD as a party standing outside of bourgeois society, although the SPD had always defended the bourgeois order.

Finally, Gabriel expressed his pride in the Agenda 2010 introduced by the Schröder government. "I am proud of the courage shown by the SPD in finally ending the crazy

system of unemployment assistance and social assistance," he says. "But the expansion of the low-wage sector was wrong and is destroying the work ethic of our society."

Gabriel is desperately trying to cover up the party's tracks with this last, thoroughly disingenuous remark. In reality the whole aim of the Agenda program was to create a huge low-wage sector which in turn puts pressure on the wages of all other sections of workers. An unemployed person today loses any entitlement to unemployment benefits after just one year. He then has to expend all his savings before being eligible for pitiful Hartz IV payments and is forced to take the most poorly paid forms of work if he does not want to lose benefits altogether.

Gabriel does not limit himself to expressing pride in the Agenda 2010. He also announces a "new Agenda" for the SPD should it assume government in the fall. He refers to a "program for the working middle", a synonym for the wealthy middle classes who earn many times the income of a single worker, but are unable to pocket the millions paid out to those at the very top of the income pyramid. Gabriel promises "a new social balance".

The SPD has lost all interest, however, for the vast majority of the population. Like all of the other leading parties it courts the favor of, and offers its services to the richest ten percent.

During the economic boom of the postwar period, the SPD was able to combine its bourgeois policy with concessions to the working class, thereby winning some support among workers and youth, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, in the midst of the biggest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, it is a bulwark for imperialism and social reaction.



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