

SPD candidate for chancellor criticizes the German government from the right

Ulrich Rippert
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During the last plenum of the German parliament before the summer recess the Social Democratic Party (SPD) candidate for chancellor in this year's federal election, Peer Steinbrück, fiercely criticized the government policy of Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU). Steinbrück accused Merkel of squandering the economic bonus that her government had inherited from the previous SPD-Green government. He also claimed she bore responsibility for a deep and growing crisis of confidence in the European Union.

The German media response was enthusiastic—and not just from newspapers close to the SPD. “Well roared lion” wrote the *Tagesspiegel*, describing the speech by the SPD chancellor candidate as “surprisingly combative”. Lead columnist of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Heribert Prantl, already sees the SPD taking power. Under the heading “Chancellor Steinbrück”, Prantl commented that the SPD candidate was “such a brilliant attacker” that he could afford to forget the despondency and timidity of his party in the recent past.

At the beginning of the plenum Chancellor Merkel declared that her coalition government had been extremely successful. She stated that far from been one sided and promoting cuts, her government's European policy included various elements promoting growth and was bearing fruit.

The correctness of a policy must always be checked in one's country, she continued, and there could be no doubt that Germany was showing signs of strength. The country's unemployment rate was at its lowest for the past twenty years and wages were increasing for the first time in a long period. Although the German economy had experienced the worst downturn in the history of the Federal Republic, Germany was “back to

pre-crisis levels.” According to Merkel: “This is the best federal government since reunification.”

Steinbrück replied by accusing Merkel of being responsible for the “dramatic increase” in unemployment in Europe, especially among young people—the result of her “one-sided austerity policy without growth elements.” He also accused the chancellor of being driven by events and of failing to provide leadership. A close examination of his speech makes clear that his criticism was basically from a right wing standpoint.

This was most apparent when Steinbrück attacked the electoral promises of the CDU, charging the chancellor with playing the “big spender” at home while admonishing everybody else in Europe for not cutting enough, and forcing some countries into an economic and social “straitjacket”.

In its election manifesto the CDU promises financial aid for families and mothers, an expansion of social infrastructure and a limit on rent levels—altogether costing an estimated 30 billion euros. Such promises are pro forma in an election campaign and invariably subject to the proviso that there must be sufficient money available, and will therefore never be realized. Nevertheless Steinbrück railed against the “spreading of social benefits”.

“What sort of example do we give to the rest of Europe?” he declared. Greeks, Spaniards, Italians or the Portuguese were told to implement harsh austerity measures while the Merkel government doled out gifts at home.

Steinbrück has no interest in promoting solidarity in a common struggle against the anti-social austerity emanating from Brussels and Berlin. His aim is to expand austerity programs everywhere. Rather than “jobs for all”, the social democratic motto in this

election campaign is “austerity for all!”

Steinbrück’s sense of solidarity extends exclusively to the super-wealthy upper class to which he belongs and for whom he speaks. His criticism of Merkel’s campaign promises barely differs from the critique of business federations and the CDU business association, which had previously proclaimed its opposition to a “program of social promises and benefits”.

In addition, his right wing onslaught is also aimed at winning favor with Merkel’s coalition partner, the free market Free Democratic Party FDP, which has also criticized the election promises of the Chancellor. Following the continuing decline of the SPD in the polls and the diminishing likelihood of a future SPD-Left Party-Green Party government after the election in September, Steinbrück and his election strategists are increasingly wooing the FDP as potential partners, in a so-called traffic light coalition (SPD red, FDP yellow and the Greens).

The right wing and reactionary stance of Steinbrück was also apparent with regard to another issue. In his typical arrogant fashion he accused Merkel of weak leadership and criticized her “hesitation and procrastination” on the basis of a historical comparison.

In 1951, “only seven years after the end of the German occupation,” the Coal and Steel Community was founded. France yielded considerable national sovereignty to Germany at the time, “despite and against the mood of the French people.”

“That was leadership, chancellor,” Steinbrück proclaimed, adding: “You have no strategy, instead you muddle through from one meeting of the European Council to the next.”

For Steinbrück and the SPD, “leadership” is above all the readiness to enforce policies against public opposition. It was on this basis that the former SPD-Green coalition government led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder imposed its deeply unpopular Agenda 2010 in the face of mass demonstrations.

A section of the German ruling class is once again seeking a change of government in favor of the SPD, hoping that a revival of the SPD-Green coalition—possibly in alliance with the FDP—would be better placed, in close co-operation with the trade unions, to enforce the social attacks which have already been prepared.

While Steinbrück openly exposes the reactionary

class character of the SPD as a party of big business and finance, the Left Party is desperately trying to daub the SPD in leftist colors.

On Thursday, Left Party parliamentary leader Gregor Gysi said in parliament that he agreed with many of Steinbrück’s criticisms of the chancellor and of government policy. At the same time, Gysi continued, he did not understand why the SPD had supported all of the government’s bank bailouts and austerity programs.

Gysi knows very well that all of the government’s budget cuts have been developed in close cooperation with the SPD. The German debt brake, which forces governments to slash budgets, was passed by a former SPD-CDU coalition with Steinbrück as finance minister.

The rapid lurch to the right by the SPD also exposes the Left Party for what it is: a bourgeois, pro-capitalist party, which is providing a pseudo left cover for a program of social counterrevolution.



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