

What is behind the German media's hype over the SPD's Martin Schulz?

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There is something bizarre about the media campaign around Martin Schulz, the German Social Democratic Party's candidate for chancellor and designated party chairman. Unexpectedly named as the SPD's candidate in this year's parliamentary elections, Schulz, until recently the European parliament president, has been celebrated in the media as a superstar.

Der Spiegel devoted two front pages to Schulz in quick succession, the first featuring Schulz with a halo and the headline "Saint Martin." The second depicted him as Chancellor Angela Merkel's conqueror and a "beacon of hope for liberal democracy." In special broadcasts, countless interviews and talk shows Schulz has touted his "campaign for justice."

As early as three days after he was chosen, headlines reported increased support for the SPD in "flash polling." At SPD headquarters, high spirits prevailed. In recent months, the Social Democrats were steadily declining in opinion polls. They never even reached 20 percent.

A week ago, the Institute for New Social Answers (INSA) in Erfurt reported that the SPD has overtaken the Union, the alliance between conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU), in opinion polls. While other opinion researchers warned of premature assessments and the former Emnid head Klaus-Peter Schöppner said he did not believe what the INSA presented as a change in mood, the report dominated the media.

"Merkeldämmerung," the twilight of Merkel, was in the air and the SPD was rising "like a phoenix from the ashes," wrote the *Augsburger Allgemeine*. Schulz was recognized as a "saviour" and had "from virtually nothing" made the party a favourite to win the election. The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote excitedly of the "Schulz Effect" that had already brought more than 1,000 new party members into the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Süddeutsche Zeitung applauded and offered the headline advice. Under the title, "What the SPD must do now," it wrote that the newly strengthened Social Democrats were at risk of moving too slowly. Schulz had given his frustrated comrades confidence and had spread a spirit of optimism. Schulz now had to carry out a "decisive change in course" and "must convincingly work out what social justice means today." The *Süddeutsche* asked: "How can it be that three quarters of all children of academics go to college, but only every fourth child of a worker? How can it be that most Germans save up less during their hard working lives than citizens from the rest of Europe?" According to the paper, Schulz would have to provide clear answers to those questions.

The claim that Schulz is the reviver of the SPD, who will lead the party back to its traditional values and the fight for greater social justice is absurd. The former mayor of the small town of Würselen near the Dutch border embodies like few others the abhorrent politics of the SPD. As a veteran member of the conservative Seeheim Circle and de facto leader of a Grand Coalition in the European parliament, he belongs to the right wing of the party.

Schulz has always defended the Hartz welfare laws, calling them "necessary reforms," even though today everyone knows that the Agenda 2010 of the Schröder-Fischer government introduced unprecedented social cuts and forced millions of workers to spend their lives in precarious and low-paying jobs. Today Schulz speaks only of a few "revisions" that would have to be made to the Agenda 2010. He will not even commit himself to increase the measly minimum wage on which no one can live.

During his time as president of the European parliament, Schulz actively participated in enforcing the diktats of the German government and the EU-Troika against Greece. In recent years, Schulz repeatedly

travelled to Athens to force the Greek government to comply and carry out massive social cuts. The pension, education and social systems were completely destroyed in this EU country and millions of workers and their families were thrust into bitter poverty and desperation.

If Schulz today says things are not fair in Germany and he wants to use his election campaign to fight for greater justice, that is pure hypocrisy. Workers know very well that the SPD spent 15 years out of the past two decades in government and oversaw the ministry of labour and social affairs. The SPD is hated as a Hartz IV party. No one, least of all Schulz, will change that.

But Schulz does not address himself to the workers and unemployed. His shallow talk of reform is directed at the many thousands of SPD functionaries and the well-paid trade union bureaucrats who are part of the upper middle class. With a mixture of moralizing phrases and EU demagoguery, he seeks to mobilize these layers and the bureaucratic apparatuses of the SPD and the trade unions to carry out the great power interests of German imperialism. He would even be willing to form a coalition with the Greens and the Left Party to do so.

Last Sunday, Schulz appeared at the SPD Employees Conference in the Bielefeld municipal hall. On a stage displaying the tools of various trades and a banner reading “Work in Germany,” Schulz spoke to an assembly of prominent SPD members and trade unionists. They received him with a standing ovation and enthusiastically applauded every criticism of the Merkel government’s policies, even though SPD minister Andrea Nahles shaped its labour and social policies.

The atmosphere in Bielefeld contained a certain nostalgia for the 1970s. But even then a right-wing social democrat by the name of Helmut Schmidt took over leadership of the SPD. Fifteen trade union bureaucrats were imbedded in his first cabinet in 1974, serving as ministers and secretaries of state. Supported by the bureaucratic apparatuses of the SPD and trade union, Schmidt suppressed strikes, built up the state and introduced a wave of social cuts that continue to this day.

In light of the profound political shifts that have begun in the US with the presidency of Donald Trump, a section of the ruling class in Germany considers the power constellation of the SPD and union bureaucrats to be entirely reasonable. Hence the media hype around Schulz and his portrayal as “Messiah of the SPD.”

Sigmar Gabriel, the outgoing chairman of the SPD, has made clear that the transfer of party leadership and Schulz’s candidacy for chancellor, combined with his

own move from the ministry of economics to the foreign office and the naming of Frank-Walter Steinmeier as president of the federal republic, is part of a social democratic offensive in foreign and domestic policy following Trump’s election.

In an extensive interview with the *Handelsblatt*, Gabriel said Trump was “bitterly serious,” but this was no reason for timidity. “If Trump begins a trade war with Asia and South America, he would also open up opportunities for us ... Europe should now work quickly on a new strategy for Asia. We must now use the space that America leaves open.” If “US protectionism leads to new opportunities for Europe throughout Asia, we should take them.”

To emphasize this German grab for world power, Gabriel envisioned a core Europe under German leadership. He called for “strengthening Europe, the development of a joint foreign and security policy and, above all, the building of our own strategy for Asia, India and China.”

At the Munich Security Conference last weekend, these questions were discussed once again. Conference leader Wolfgang Ischinger stressed that after Trump’s election, a “joint EU foreign and security policy is more necessary than ever before.” Germany would have to play a stronger and more politically conscious role. At the same time, a massive increase in military spending was agreed upon.

While Chancellor Merkel agreed, and even she has distanced herself from Trump, the Union alliance is divided on foreign policy. The CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the CSU, works with ultra-nationalist parties like the Hungarian Fidesz and has frequently come to Trump’s defence.

For two decades the “red-green” government played a key role in using brute force to realize the Agenda 2010 and at the same time laid the foreign policy groundwork for the first foreign deployment of the Bundeswehr and a significant upgrading of the military. Now the SPD will once again take on the leading part in carrying out the interests of German imperialism.



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