

Frenetic greeting by delegates for the new SPD leader

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Last Sunday, Martin Schulz was elected chairman of the SPD with 100 percent of delegates' votes. He was then unanimously confirmed as the party's candidate for the post of chancellor in a future government.

The SPD's special congress in Berlin was marked by a jubilation which bordered on hysteria. Even Martin Schulz's entry into the "Arena," a former bus station in the eastern part of the city converted into an expensive "event location," was met with unceasing standing ovations.

Schulz then spoke for almost an hour and a half, and was repeatedly interrupted by stormy applause and calls of bravo. In the subsequent vote there was not a single "no" vote among the 605 valid ballot papers. The new head of the SPD received all the votes, 100 percent. This is unique in the history of the party, which dates back to its foundation, initially as the Allgemeine Deutscher Arbeiterverein (ADAV), in 1863.

The delegates' enthusiasm knew no limits, with hugs, flowers and repeated stormy applause dominating. Just under five hours later, the Louis Armstrong song "What a Wonderful World" sounded through the loudspeakers as the congress ended.

Many media commentators were at a loss about how to explain this euphoria on the part of the SPD. The speech given by the new chairman was certainly not the cause. In both content and form his speech lacked any quality which could trigger such enthusiasm. Schulz himself was surprised at the enthusiasm of the delegates and the election result. He could have read aloud from the telephone book, *SpiegelOnline* wrote, delegates would have clapped and shouted bravo anyway.

In fact, Schulz's party speech differed very little from the speeches he had delivered during the past few weeks in several cities. He began with an appeal for a

better future. The party must have the courage to believe in itself. "We are a strong party that has survived the imperial empire, war and dictatorships," he declared to the delegates, and then drew upon his own biography.

Schulz said he knew what it meant to start afresh. As the fifth child of "simple and decent people," his mother a housewife, his father a policeman, he had encountered many problems in his youth: in school he was judged to be "really lazy," he failed to graduate, had problems with alcohol, lost his way, etc., so that "Nearly everything went wrong in my life." Then he had a second chance, entered politics and was elected twice as mayor. He then spent "22 years as a deputy in the European parliament, eight years as chairman of the Social Democratic Group and the last five years as president of the European parliament."

Schulz has repeatedly referred to these biographical details in recent weeks. He wants to suggest two things: firstly, that he is not part of the elite and is familiar with the concerns of ordinary people; and secondly, that he had overcome crises in his own life and would now lead the SPD out of its current crisis. This line of argument is well known. The former SPD leader and chancellor Gerhard Schröder had also stressed his origins as a "child of poor people." This did not prevent him from leading a government which implemented the biggest attack on social welfare since the end of the war (the Agenda 2010 program), while drastically reducing taxes for the rich.

The second point in Schulz's speech was his appeal for more social justice, although on Sunday he was less specific than in previous speeches. He avoided the words Hartz IV and Agenda 2010, after his earlier demand for reforms to be made to the key legislation introduced by Schröder met with criticism not only

from business associations, but also layers inside the SPD.

Instead, he quoted the conservative economist Meinhard Miegel, who had spoken of growing poverty and an “almost obscene level of wealth” and warned of the political consequences of growing social divisions. Schulz also regards increasing poverty from the standpoint of potential social unrest. He emphasized that social justice was not a “concept from the textbook of the class struggle,” but rather a basic condition for the stability of the community.

The third part of the Schulz speech dealt with Europe. “The answer to global uncertainties is Europe,” he told delegates, emphasizing that defence of the EU was for him “a matter of the heart.”

The frenetic applause for Schulz was not due to his speech, which regurgitated well-known social-democratic phrases, some of them newly packaged. It would be utterly naive to believe that SPD bureaucrats had suddenly discovered their social conscience and were now prepared to support the demand for equal pay for equal work, while opposing child labour.

The more than 600 delegates are, in their vast majority, senior party and trade union apparatchiks who enforce the mandatory debt brake at a state and municipal level while engineering growing social inequality on a daily basis. The SPD is not only the architect of the Agenda 2010, it has participated in the federal government for 15 of the past 20 years, regularly filling the posts of minister of labor and social affairs. It could have set into motion policies promoting social justice, but did not want to in the past and does not want to now.

The rejoicing at the congress and the hysteria around Schulz have different causes. Behind the call, “The SPD is back!” is the rallying cry: “Germany is back!”

The stage-managed party congress is part of a campaign to reorganize the SPD as the leading party of German imperialism. In light of the profound political changes arising from Donald Trump's assumption of the presidency in the US, a section of the ruling class in Germany is now contemplating the prospect of a governing coalition involving the SPD and trade union bureaucracy, if necessary in cooperation with the Greens and the Left Party. This explains the media hype surrounding Schulz and his promotion as the “renewer of the SPD.”

Schulz's takeover as party chair and chancellor candidate, the switch of Sigmar Gabriel (former SPD chair) from the Ministry of Economic Affairs to the Foreign Office, and the appointment of Frank-Walter Steinmeier (former SPD foreign minister) as the new German president are all part of a social-democratic offensive in foreign and domestic politics following Trump's election.

In order to counter Trump as effectively as possible, Berlin is pursuing a strategy of mobilizing the entire EU for trade war with the US. The *Handelsblatt* cites the former chief economist of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Jeromin Zettelmeyer, who told the paper: “Germany needs “the backing of the other Europeans,” because “They [the US] may possibly conduct a trade war against us.”

According to a report in *Der Spiegel*, the German government is working to “isolate the Americans.” At the EU summit in early March, EU countries had opposed “protectionist tendencies” in world trade and thereby placed the European economy in conflict with the US.

Just a few weeks ago, Foreign Minister Gabriel stressed that if Trump started a trade war with Asia and South America, Europe would quickly develop a new strategy for Asia. The room left by America must be taken up by Europe and Germany. “If US protectionism leads to the opening up of new opportunities for Europe across Asia, we should have access,” Gabriel told the *Handelsblatt*.

In order to strengthen the German grip on world power, Gabriel, Schulz and President Steinmeier are striving towards developing a European core under German leadership. These plans are associated with a gigantic expansion of the military. A tripling of defence spending was one of the demands raised at the Munich Security Conference last month.

It is this new German great power policy which tops the agenda for Schulz, Gabriel, and Steinmeier and which was behind the bizarre scenes and hysterical enthusiasm witnessed at the SPD congress.



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