

German SPD leader Martin Schulz: A false friend of Siemens workers

Peter Schwarz
24 November 2017

The well-known proverb “Beware of false friends” should be taken as a warning by German Siemens workers, who are protesting against the elimination of 6,900 jobs and the shuttering of several plants. Some 2,500 Siemens employees demonstrated in Berlin on Thursday.

Among the speakers who addressed the protesters was Social Democratic (SPD) leader Martin Schulz. He condemned the company’s actions as “anti-social” and “irresponsible.” He accused Siemens of following the maxim, “So we can make a bit more profit, we’ll throw the people out.” A day earlier, IG Metall trade union leader Jörg Hofmann bellowed that his organization would not accept the closure of plants and will “now make an orderly ruckus.”

But despite their radical phrase-mongering, the SPD and IG Metall have been at the forefront of the ruling elite’s drive to slash workers’ wages and benefits. Hofmann leads a trade union whose functionaries, works councilors and supervisory board representatives have negotiated and signed off on hundreds of thousands of job cuts over recent years and decades—at Siemens, Opel, ThyssenKrupp and many other companies.

Schulz is chairman of a party which with the Hartz laws created the means making it possible for the companies to impose ruthless attacks on workers. The huge low-wage sector created as a result of Agenda 2010 creates downward pressure to reduce wages and undermine working conditions. Schulz spent 23 years of his political career in the European Parliament, and as its president he played a major part in throwing the living standards of Greek workers back decades.

After attending the Siemens workers’ demonstration, Schulz hurried to Bellevue Palace, where he informed German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier that the

SPD is no longer insisting on new elections to resolve the government crisis. On Monday, after the failure of the Jamaica coalition talks, the SPD executive, at Schulz’s insistence, unanimously called for new elections.

In practice, the SPD’s about-face either means they will back the continuation of the hated grand coalition, which was severely punished in the federal election, or support a minority government made up of only Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union ministers that could rely on the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany), Free Democrats or Greens when required.

Both cases would involve the creation of an extreme right-wing government which will owe its power to manoeuvres behind the scenes with no democratic legitimacy. This would intensify the attacks on jobs, workers’ rights, wages and pensions, and press ahead with the strengthening of the domestic and external state apparatus that was begun by the grand coalition.

Siemens chief executive Joe Kaeser, who knows Schulz’s real agenda, mockingly answered his accusation of irresponsibility by referring to Schulz’s refusal to negotiate a new government coalition. “Perhaps you should consider who is acting irresponsibly,” he wrote in an open letter to the SPD leader. “Those who proactively deal with foreseeable structural problems and search for long-term solutions, or those who avoid taking responsibility and dialogue.”

Schulz’s appearance at the Siemens demonstration prior to his meeting with Steinmeier shows what the SPD leader is up to. His initial insistence on new elections was linked to the fear that left-wing and socialist ideas would gain influence if the SPD remained in the government and left the leadership of the opposition to the right-wing extremist AfD.

Social tensions are seething beneath the surface. The Siemens demonstration in Berlin was only one of many demonstrations over recent days. Also on Thursday, around 8,000 employees of ThyssenKrupp's steel division protested in Andersnach, Rheinland-Palatinate against the planned merger with India's Tata Steel. On Wednesday, a thousand laid off workers from the bankrupt Air Berlin marched from Berlin's main train station to the Chancellor's Office. *Spiegel Online* entitled an article, "Anger at the bosses, anger at politics." And over the previous days, protests were held at several Siemens locations.

The SPD is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain control over social dissatisfaction in alliance with the trade unions, and to inoculate it against the influence of socialists. The SPD has been in government since 1998, with just one four-year break. This has discredited the party. It has shrunk to an organisational rump of state office holders, functionaries and public officials and barely secured 20 percent of the vote in the election.

The SPD's attempt to pose as an opposition party also collides with its call for "responsible statesmanship." President Steinmeier, Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), Chancellor Angela Merkel and other leading state representatives want to avoid at all costs a re-run of the election because they fear an open political conflict. They are pushing for the decision on the composition of the next government to be arrived at in a small circle. In addition, there is the fear that a long-lasting government crisis would weaken Germany's international standing. By abandoning the call for new elections, the SPD has endorsed this stance.

It is impossible to defend a single job, or any social or democratic right without challenging this conspiracy. The workers will confront the embittered hostility of the SPD and trade unions, and the government they back, if they launch a genuine struggle against Siemens' plan, and not just a symbolic protest.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) demands new elections to prevent the formation of a right-wing government behind the scenes. The SGP fights for a socialist program, which unites the working class on the basis of a struggle against social inequality, war and capitalism. Such a program, which places the social interests of the working class above the profit interests

of the corporations, provides the basis for a defence of jobs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact