

Germany: SPD congress backs grand coalition government as class struggle intensifies

Ulrich Rippert
11 December 2019

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) charts its party congresses very carefully according to date and venue. The party's latest congress, which ended last weekend in Berlin, could well go down in history as the "Party congress marked by desperation."

The three-day conference was characterised by a striking contradiction. On the one hand, SPD delegates confirmed Norbert Walter-Borjans and Saskia Esken, two little-known outsiders, as new party leaders after the pair criticised the course of the previous party leadership and posed as a "left-wing alternative" and "opponents of the grand coalition."

At the same time delegates voted down a motion at the congress to quit Germany's ruling grand coalition, which consists of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and SPD. A series of speakers stressed that quitting the government would be very wrong and politically irresponsible. Instead, the SPD should intensify its work as part of the government, insert "more of its own political profile" into the coalition, and enforce "more social democratic positions."

The two new chairpersons also backtracked. In the election campaign for the party leadership both Walter-Borjans and Esken had repeatedly declared their intention of renegotiating the coalition agreement and quitting the government, should the CDU and CSU refuse to make concessions. In their speeches at the congress, however, they stressed that an immediate or hasty exit from the government was never their intention. What was necessary, they argued, was to "strengthen the social democratic profile" and on this basis carry out talks with the coalition partners.

In the past, Young Socialist leader Kevin Kühnert had acted as spokesman for opponents of the grand coalition in the SPD. At an early stage, he had pledged the support of the SPD youth organisation to Walter-Borjans and Esken. At the party conference, however, he argued in favour of closer cooperation with the old party leadership led by Germany's finance minister and vice-chancellor, Olaf Scholz.

On the eve of the congress, Kühnert had warned in an interview of "the consequences of a premature exit" from the

government. "Whoever leaves a coalition, yields part of their control," he said. He went on to praise the government's work: "Even critics like me cannot deny that the main work was clearly dominated by the SPD." At the party congress, where he demanded, "Dare more SPD!" he was elected as one of the five deputies to the two party leaders.

Trade union and business representatives also urged a continuation of the grand coalition. Reinhard Hoffmann, head of the German trade union organisation DGB, demanded: "Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans should do their utmost to support the government in the second half of its term and successfully implement the projects still remaining from the coalition agreement."

The SPD has been in a state of growing desperation for some time. Since the reunification of Germany 30 years ago, it has lost half its membership. Of the 430,000 registered members, most are merely card-carriers. Only half of the membership took part in the vote for the party leadership.

In the general election of 1998, the SPD still won 40.9 percent of the vote. Since then it's been going downhill rapidly. In the latest polls the SPD fluctuates between 11 and 13 percent. In state elections held in October, the Social Democrats gained just 8.2 percent in Thuringia, and in Saxony, once a bedrock of the party, its support slumped to 7.7 percent of the vote.

The policy of the grand coalition is opposed by the broad majority of the population, and that includes SPD members. Many of them are functionaries and careerists who fear losing their highly paid posts in state and local administrations as electoral defeats mount and support for the party slumps.

The surprise result of the election for the party leadership should be understood in this context. It is an expression of the deep unease amongst SPD members with the grand coalition, not because they reject its right-wing policies, but rather because of the plunge in support for the SPD and the associated danger of party officials losing their posts.

In the face of mounting resistance, the SPD is responding to social pressure by holding fast to the grand coalition's right-wing agenda, of accelerating military rearmament, curtailing

democratic rights and building up police-state structures. At the same time, the new party leadership is proposing a few minor social reforms in the hope of slowing down the party's decline.

This division of labour between party leaders and government officials is a response to the intensification of the international crisis of capitalism and the marked increase in class struggle worldwide. For over a hundred years the SPD has suppressed the class struggle and defended the bourgeois order. Now it fears that popular opposition could get out of control and threaten the capitalist foundations of society.

A few days before the congress, an article headlined "The World in Turmoil" appeared in *Die Zeit*, a weekly with traditional links to the SPD. It starts as follows: "Did you notice? The world is in flames" and goes on to warn against the growth of international class struggle. "In Hong Kong, Warsaw, Budapest, Istanbul, Moscow and Malta, people are taking to the streets to stand up for democratic rights. In Pakistan, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, the population is incensed and in Lebanon, Bolivia and Iraq, they are striving to overthrow their governments."

Social unrest has never been so widespread worldwide since 1989. Social tensions are erupting everywhere. "In Lebanon, a planned WhatsApp tax was enough, in Saudi Arabia an increase in the taxation of hookah restaurants. In France, Zimbabwe, Ecuador and Iran increased gasoline prices were the trigger, in Chile an increase in subway prices."

These questions were not addressed directly at the SPD party congress but were nevertheless omnipresent.

Simultaneously with the congress, a general strike began in neighbouring France, triggering a new phase of political confrontation with the hated Macron government and of the class struggle across Europe. In Germany, the major auto companies and suppliers have announced in the past few days the wiping out of tens of thousands of jobs. The unions are barely able to keep popular anger and indignation under control.

In this situation, the new SPD leadership is making some hollow social reformist promises in the hope of absorbing and controlling growing anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class. At the same time, it supports the government's radical right-wing course and provides it with political cover.

A number of congress speeches called for a "reform of the welfare state" and the two new party leaders summarised in their own speeches the following catalogue of intentions:

- Hartz IV welfare payments to be abolished in the foreseeable future and the unemployed allowed to receive unemployment pay for a longer period. The minimum wage should be raised "as a perspective" to €12 per hour based on a "Minimum Wage Law 2020," plus a child benefit of at least €250 per month (currently it is between €204 and €235) paid for every child in Germany.
- The rate of pension payments is to be stabilised in the long term. There should be no further increase in retirement age, but

instead steps to introduce an insurance for all those employed, plus a comprehensive citizens insurance aimed at ending the gulf between private and state insurance for elderly care.

- The government's "debt brake," disallowing any new borrowing, should be "overcome in the current form"—once against as "a perspective." A wealth tax should be introduced to enable more investment, and rents in cities with restricted housing markets frozen for five years.

In addition, the congress called for "consistent climate protection" and the introduction of a "socially just and effective" CO2 price.

None of this is meant seriously. With the exception of four years, the SPD has been part of the federal government since 1998. The social counterrevolution carried out during this period, first and foremost the Agenda 2010 and Hartz laws, has all the hallmarks of the SPD.

The party's latest bout of social rhetoric is a desperate attempt to slow down the ongoing decline of the SPD. However, the character of the SPD as a right-wing party of the state is well known. The "new reform program," which has been broadly commented on in the media and described as an important step for a "social-democratic new beginning" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), is nothing more than a flimsy cover for the continuation of the right-wing, anti-working-class policies of the grand coalition.

The more the class struggle intensifies, the more resolutely the SPD lines up behind the state apparatus, big business, finance and the trade unions, which together enforce cuts to social provisions and jobs. The party fully represents the interests of the banks, large corporations, intelligence services and the army. The new party leadership and its "social program" will change absolutely nothing in this respect.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact