

Germany's Social Democrats reaffirm rearmament and Great Power policy

Ulrich Rippert
2 July 2025

Anyone who followed the Social Democratic Party (SPD) congress in Berlin last weekend must again answer the question—"Are there any limits to the decline and political bankruptcy of the Social Democrats?"—with a resounding "No."

Ahead of the congress, SPD headquarters in the Willy Brandt House had declared that the main task was to examine the disastrous election result in the last Bundestag (federal parliament) election in February. The SPD had secured just 16.4 percent of the vote—its worst ever result. But during the congress, the leadership around party chairman Lars Klingbeil and Defence Minister Boris Pistorius pushed through exactly the same policies that had led to these massive losses—and even intensified them.

The real prelude to the congress had already taken place in the Bundestag, when the SPD parliamentary group, almost unanimously, voted in favour of a massive attack on refugees and asylum seekers. To sustained applause from MPs from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Bundestag voted to suspend family reunification for people granted so-called subsidiary protection status. According to Pro Asyl, these are individuals who face serious harm if returned to their country of origin, even if they do not meet the strict criteria of refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention. They have fled war and civil war and have often been living in Germany for years without parents, children, or partners. Now the Bundestag has taken away even the already limited possibility of family reunification. Only two SPD MPs defied party discipline and voted against this brutal, inhumane decision—one that essentially adopts AfD policy.

Opening the congress, party chairman Klingbeil called for unity within the party apparatus. "In difficult times," he said, it was necessary to close ranks. Criticism had to "remain within limits" and should not fall below "the necessary measure of solidarity among Social Democrats." Factional infighting, personal disputes, and leaks—often at the expense of party leaders—had caused much damage in the past.

Addressing the disastrous election result and the prevailing mood of despair, Klingbeil said he kept reading commentaries and editorials claiming, "Actually, social democracy is no longer needed." He admitted: "I'll be honest, in the run-up to this congress, I also asked myself: Have we reached a point where we must question whether social democracy is still needed?" After much reflection, he had concluded "that the reality is exactly the opposite."

The SPD was more important than ever, especially today, "in

times of great uncertainty, upheaval, economic difficulties, and attacks on peace and freedom." A party that did not polarise but built bridges was urgently needed. Klingbeil stated: "Especially in these times, we need a party that knows that military strength on the one hand and diplomacy on the other are not opposites—but must be combined to shape policy for our country."

It would be hard to find a clearer description of the SPD's historical role over the past 111 years—ever since it voted for war credits in summer 1914 at the outset of the First World War. In every major crisis of German imperialism, the SPD has played a key role in suppressing class struggle and keeping the capitalist ruling class in power. In the service of German imperialism, it has always been ready to subordinate its own party interests and accept electoral defeats.

Whereas the party once enjoyed broader support among workers, it has now been reduced almost entirely to its apparatus, which is intimately intertwined with the state. Maintaining capitalist rule has become second nature to the SPD, which imposes social cuts and war by every available means—even at the cost of its own collapse.

It is from this standpoint that Klingbeil's own electoral setback must be viewed. In the vote for party chairman, he received just 64.9 percent of delegates' votes—the worst such result in SPD history. But this vote of no confidence was not directed against the right-wing policy of militaristic rearmament that Klingbeil and the entire leadership pursue, nor against the social cuts that finance this rearmament, which he implements as finance minister.

Rather, his poor result was the delegates' way of demanding that these right-wing policies be packaged and enforced in such a manner that would not endanger their own lucrative posts at federal, state, and municipal level.

Next, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius spoke and repeated his familiar propaganda that Germany urgently needed to become "defensible and ready for war." He defended the insane sums—amounting to trillions—being spent on rearmament and military infrastructure. As Europe's largest economy, Germany must in future play a central role and make a special contribution, he demanded.

Citing the need to be able to "respond if the security situation or the requirements of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) demand it," Pistorius justified the decisions of the recent NATO summit, which agreed to the most comprehensive rearmament of Europe since the Second World War. In the future, instead of 2 percent, 5

percent of GDP is to be spent on military purposes: 3.5 percent on purely military spending (troops and weapons) and another 1.5 percent on measures such as cybersecurity, infrastructure and barracks construction.

Pistorius left no doubt who would pay for this militarisation. He has repeatedly stated in earlier speeches: “You can’t defend this country with social benefits and education.” It is well known that the federal government has already begun shifting budget funds away from social and environmental programmes into the military.

When the defence minister declared that Germany had to face reality—that the Bundeswehr was understaffed and that “the target of recruiting at least 60,000 additional soldiers and 200,000 reservists” must be achieved—his speech was interrupted by some members of the party’s youth wing, the Jusos (Young Socialists). They shouted slogans such as “Disarmament and democracy—instead of rearmament and war” and held up banners. Later, Jusos chair Philipp Türmer took the microphone and moved an emergency motion rejecting any reintroduction of compulsory military service. A return to conscription was unacceptable, he emphasised.

Pistorius had already planned to include coercive measures in his draft conscription law, to apply if there were insufficient volunteers. He firmly opposed those “who think we should rule out any form of compulsion.” Several Jusos spoke against this, stressing that a “return to the old conscription” was unacceptable. Service in the Bundeswehr should be made so attractive that enough volunteers would be recruited, they argued.

In the end, the congress agreed—by a large majority and with only a few votes against—to postpone any decision on conscription until it becomes directly relevant. The compromise resolution adopted stated that the SPD backed a “new military service” modelled on Sweden’s system, as set out in the SPD’s coalition agreement with the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU).

This also made clear why the Jusos opposed compulsory military service: not for reasons of principle, but pure self-interest. Like their chairman Philipp Türmer (father: fully qualified lawyer and former head of the legal department at the Federal Interior Ministry; mother: senior public prosecutor), most of these SPD protégés come from privileged backgrounds. They do not want to interrupt their careers by serving in the army and have no intention of standing in the trenches for their own war policy.

Instead, it is working-class youth who are to be driven into military service. Their access to higher education is increasingly restricted, and in many regions, they cannot even find decent apprenticeships. They are to be the future cannon fodder.

At the end of the congress, there was broad consensus among the 600 delegates. Without a single dissenting vote or abstention, they approved a motion by the party executive calling for a federal-state working group to collect evidence of the AfD’s unconstitutionality. If enough evidence is gathered, the SPD plans to apply to the Supreme Court to have the party banned. Klingbeil declared that the SPD had a “historic responsibility” to take legal action against the AfD.

This revealed how the AfD is in fact being used to justify the SPD’s own right-wing policies and to enforce authoritarian structures. Especially in refugee policy, the demands of the AfD

are being implemented almost word for word. Even before the recent suspension of family reunification for vulnerable migrants, the Bundestag last year passed the so-called “Repatriation Improvement Act,” allowing the authorities to detain people due for deportation for up to 28 days and to remove them from their homes in the middle of the night.

The militaristic rearmament is also taking place to the cheers of the AfD, which openly states that its programme is finally being implemented. The governing parties—SPD and CDU/CSU—not only put AfD policies into practice but have also promoted the party and integrated it into parliamentary work. In this way, they have systematically made far-right positions socially acceptable.

When the SPD now calls for banning the AfD, this is not about fighting the far-right but about further strengthening the state apparatus of repression. The collection of evidence concerning the AfD’s unconstitutionality is to be carried out by the *Verfassungsschutz* (domestic intelligence service). It is precisely Germany’s intelligence agency—infamous and despised for its chronic right-wing bias, which stretches back to the Nazi era—that is to prepare an expert report concerning which parties may exist and which may not.

Such strengthening of the intelligence services and the state security apparatus is aimed directly against the vast majority of the working class, who are increasingly coming into conflict with policies of militarisation and the associated social attacks—and are beginning to resist them.

And this is the real lesson of the SPD party congress. Faced with growing opposition to pro-war policies, social cuts and a veritable wave of redundancies in industry and administrative roles, the SPD apparatus—with its thousands of functionaries—is closing ranks more tightly, merging with the state apparatus, and confronting the working class ever more openly as an enemy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact